

Horror in Culture & Entertainment

RUE MORGUE

NOW IN OUR **24TH YEAR!**

FINLAND GIVES BIRTH TO HORROR
HANNA BERGHOLM AND ILJA RAUTSI'S

Hatching

PLUS!
ALEKSANDR PTUSHKO'S
SAMPO

A.K.A. THE DAY THE EARTH FROZE

HELSINKI
MANSPLOAINING
MASSACRE

NIGHT OF
THE LIVING
DICKS

ISSUE 205 MAR/APRIL 2022 US \$12.95 CAN \$13.95
100 YEARS OF
HÄXAN

THE RISE OF
HORROR POETRY

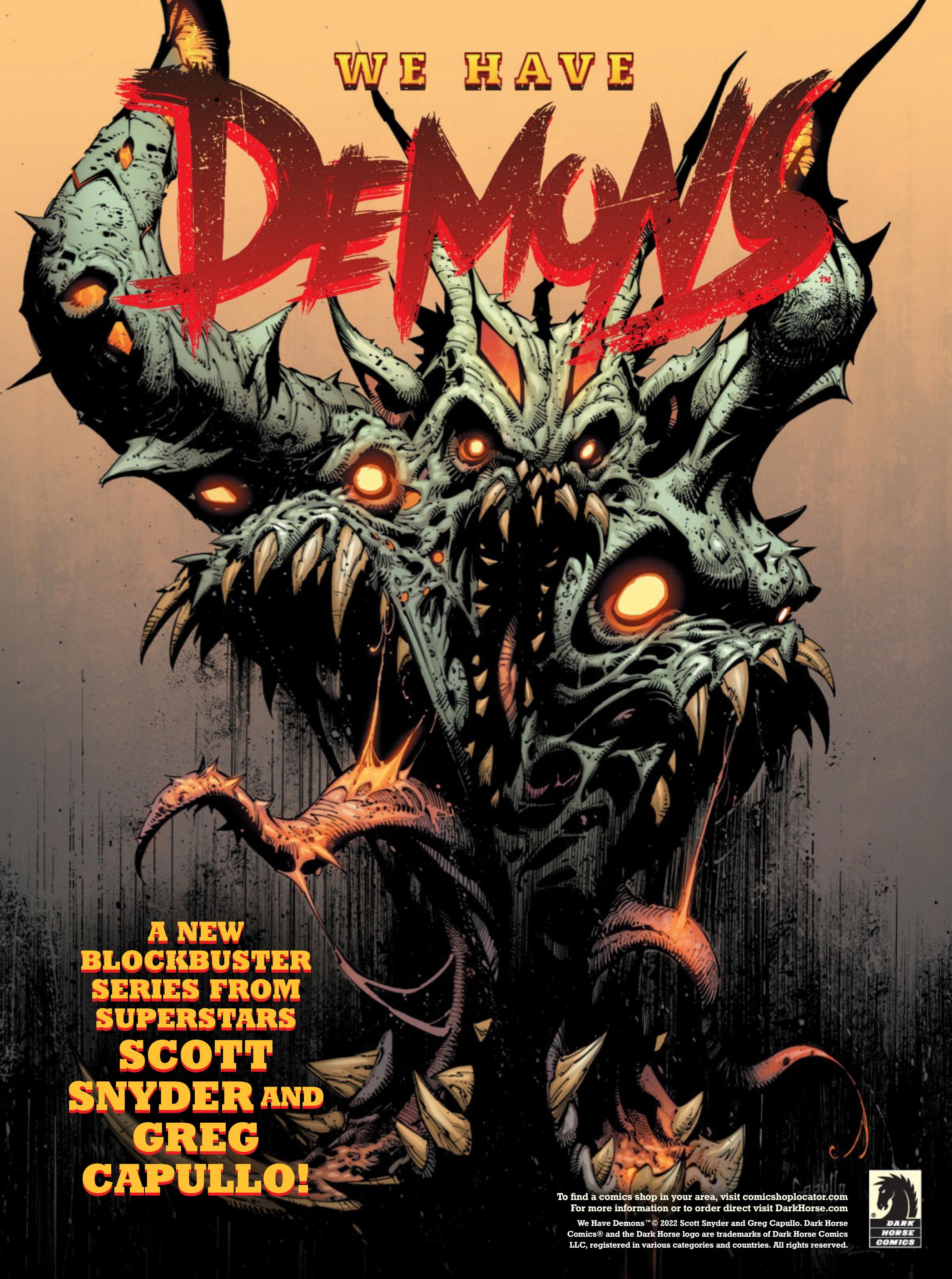
THE LIFE & ART OF
VERNE LANGDON

PLUS!

PANDEMOMIUM: A VISUAL HISTORY OF DEMONOLOGY

THE CONTEMPORARY LESSONS OF LADY IN A CAGE • THE WITCHY CRAFT OF SLUTFOCATE





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12 ROTTEN EGG

This spring, Finland-based horror filmmakers Hanna Bergholm and Ilja Rautsi release *Hatching*, their feature-length exploration into the bond between mother and child... and the results are traumatic.

PLUS! *Hatching* screenwriter Rautsi proves he is no stranger to satire with his unique brand of caustic horror shorts, and Aleksandr Ptushko's *Sampo* a.k.a. *The Day the Earth Froze* (1959) restored in 4K!

by ANDREA SUBISSATI and ROCCO T. THOMPSON

20 HEX OF THE CENTURY

Benjamin Christensen's *Häxan*, a film that first cast its spell one hundred years ago, still works its dark magic. **PLUS!** Rue Morgue traces the many attempts over the years to lend sound to *Häxan*'s stunning visuals.

by DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ and AARON VON LUPTON

26 DARKEST VERSE

Poetry may not be the first thing that comes to mind when someone says "horror," but horror poetry is thriving. **PLUS!** Anna Cheung's *Where Decay Sleeps*.

by MONICA S. KUEBLER

30 ONE MAN CARNIVAL

Rue Morgue salutes the phantasmagoric life and art of Verne Langdon.

by HEATHER DRAIN

DEPARTMENTS

NOTE FROM UNDERGROUND 6

Omelette for Easter.

POST-MORTEM 7

Letters from fans, readers and weirdos.

THE CORONER'S REPORT 8

Weird Stats & Morbid Facts, Expiring Minds, Shadowland and more!

NEEDFUL THINGS 10

Strange trinkets from our bazaar of the bizarre.

CINEMACABRE 32

The newest films and reissues, featuring Mickey Keating's *Offseason*.

REISSUED & RE-ANIMATED 40

REVIVED: *Alligator* Breaks Out on 4K/Blu-ray.

BOWEN'S BASEMENT 42

DUG UP: *Blood Rage* (1987).

BLACK MUSEUM 44

EXHIBIT: *Lady in a Cage* (1964).

BLOOD IN FOUR COLOURS 46

INKED IN: Joe Mulvey and Rich Douek's *Happy Hill*.

THE NINTH CIRCLE 48

SPOTLIGHT: Ed Simon's *Pandemonium: A Visual History of Demonology*.

THE FRIGHT GALLERY 52

ON DISPLAY: The Witchy Craft of Slutfocate.

DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS 54

CURIO: Elizabeth Báthory, video game designer.

AUDIO DROME 57

NOW PLAYING: *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* soundtrack.

PLAY DEAD 60

PLAYING: To VR or not to VR.

VS 62

DEBATE: What horror movie has the most misleading poster?

NOTE FROM UNDERGROUND

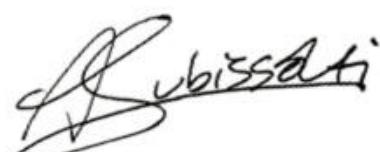
I don't miss being forced to attend church, but I sometimes wonder if people who never went are aware of the macabre pageantry they might be missing out on. I was raised Roman Catholic until my parents gave up on my eternal soul, and I used to dread giving up Sunday morning cartoons for masses held in my elementary school gym – bad enough to make me go to church but it was literally school on a Sunday! For the bigger religious holidays, however, we'd pack up our Chrysler New Yorker to spend the weekend in Montreal with my wider family, and on those occasions, we'd attend mass in Italian at a fancy basilica. And lemme tell ya, Italian mass on Easter weekend was a *trip*.

You see, even at a young age, I glommed onto the idea of suffering, and so Good Friday (when Jesus was arrested, tortured and crucified) was way more interesting to me than the supposedly uplifting resurrection story of Easter Monday, where Christ pulls a sweet posthumous Irish-goodbye from behind a rock. Usually skinny but sometimes oddly buff and beefcake-y, suffering Jesus was consistently scantily clad – the better to observe his suffering, I suppose, but it was early torture porn for this budding horror fan. My favourite part was when attendees were invited to participate in an oral re-enactment of his trial: "Crucify him," we would chant in Italian, demanding the release of Barabbas in Jesus' place, some waving fists for maximum historic accuracy. The story is actually kinda badass if told properly (and if you're in the mood for a rousing funk edition, check out Norman Jewison's 1973 film adaptation of *Jesus Christ Superstar* with its diverse and impossibly gorgeous cast of leads. Dear Father, will I go to Hell if I'm sexually attracted to groovy Judas?), but I'm not here to blaspheme.

I used to wonder what the fuck eggs had to do with Easter, and why on earth we'd come up with the unlikely scenario of bunnies laying them for us to find around the house. Realistically, we should be finding bloodstains from Jesus' 40 lashes, no? Or parading shirtless in thorny crowns? Those deliciously dark themes of Catholicism that I once sank my baby teeth into have been weirdly Ned Flanders-sized into an excuse to hunt for (read: buy) chocolate, and we've reverted focus to a rounder, cleaner, more family-friendly symbol of regeneration – one less cruel than bloody Jesus, but still not vegan. But leave it to our horror-loving kindred in Finland to take the symbol of purity, vulnerability, and promise, and scramble it into one supremely fucked-up Easter omelette.

Hatching is a perfect film to celebrate springtime where a wholesome, picture-perfect Instagram feed disguises a stifling and toxic environment for a seemingly ideal nuclear family. The film's pint-sized protagonist, Ninja, is the apple of her mother's eye, the jewel in her crown of performative parenting, the gymnastic champion that could only result from the very best upbringing. But Ninja's just a kid trying to make sense of her mom's obsession with appearances, and to paraphrase an old Italian priest somewhere, something's gotta give. Protective geometric marvels that they are, even eggs can crack under pressure... revealing something new and not always very nice. Ninja's new pet thrives on her pain as much as her vomit – now that's an Easter horror story!

So lay down your cross, hang up your crown of thorns, and kick back to this Finnish dark fairy tale while the unfound eggs in your apartment building rot. Whether you celebrate bloody/sexy Jesus or worship at the altar of chocolate bunnies, marshmallow peeps help the metaphors go down. So smile nice for the camera – this one's going viral.


ANDREA SUBISSATI
andrea@rue-morgue.com

Horror in Culture & Entertainment

RUE MORGUE

MARRS MEDIA INC. RUE-MORGUE.COM
1411 DUFFERIN STREET, TORONTO, ONTARIO, M6H 4C7, CANADA
PH: 416.651.9675 FAX: 416.651.6085 EMAIL: INFO@RUE-MORGUE.COM
FB: [FACEBOOK.COM/RUEMORGUEMAGAZINE](https://facebook.com/ruemorguemagazine) TWITTER: [TWITTER.COM/RUEMORGUE](https://twitter.com/ruemorgue)

STAFF

PUBLISHER	EXECUTIVE EDITOR
RODRIGO GUDIÑO	ANDREA SUBISSATI
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR	MUSIC EDITOR
MONICA S. KUEBLER	AARON VON LUPTON
ART DIRECTOR	GAMES EDITOR
ANDREW WRIGHT	EVAN MILLAR
OPERATIONS COORDINATOR	STAFF WRITER
MARIAM BASTANI	SEAN PLUMMER
FINANCIAL CONTROLLER	HEAD ONLINE WRITER
MARCO PECOTA	MICHAEL GINGOLD
INTERNS	ONLINE MANAGING EDITOR
ALEXANDREA FIORANTE	ROCCO T. THOMPSON
LAURA HOKSTAD	ONLINE ASSISTANT EDITOR
MARKETING AND	GRACE DETWILER
PROMOTIONS MANAGER	SPECIAL PROJECTS MANAGER
JODY INFURNARI	DAVE ALEXANDER
PH: 905-985-0430	
E: jody@rue-morgue.com	

RUE MORGUE INTERNATIONAL

FABIEN DELAGE (FRANCE)	facebook.com/RueMorgueFrance
CHARLOTTE STEAR (UK)	facebook.com/RueMorgueUK
MOANER T. LAWRENCE (GERMANY)	facebook.com/RueMorgueGermany
AARON SOTO (MEXICO)	facebook.com/RueMorgueMexico

CONTRIBUTORS

BENOIT BLACK	RICK HIPSON
JOHN W. BOWEN	LAST CHANCE LANCE
JESSICA BUCK	LISA MORTON
JAMES BURRELL	RJ NADON
PEDRO CABEZUELO	DEJAN OGNJANOVIC
BRYAN CHRISTOPHER	STACIE PONDER
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RUE MORGUE #205 would not have been possible without the valuable assistance of Kate McEdwards, Lauren Walsh, Al McMullan, and Vela.

Cover Art: *Hatching*
Design by Andrew Wright

Rue Morgue magazine is published bi-monthly and accepts no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts, photos, art or other materials. Freelance inquiries can be submitted at RUE-MORGUE.COM.

Funded by the
Government
of Canada | Canada

RUE MORGUE Magazine #205 ISSN 1481 – 1103
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POST MORTEM

COMMENTS • QUESTIONS • CRITICISM



ONE OF THE many great things I enjoy about *Rue Morgue* is the thrill of discovering new and older films, books, items, music, and all things horror. Your article about Kaelan Mikla, the black metal trio from Iceland, made my whole winter! Immediately after finishing it, I watched all of their videos and live performances on YouTube and have been listening to their new album, *Undir Köldum Noroumíðum* (*Under the Cold Northern Lights*), on Spotify. This album along with their earlier work is perfect for cold winter days when the sun sets early and the wind whips up against the windows. Their synth, bass, and vocals are both haunting and inspiring. I can't wait to see them perform live someday down the road. Thank you for once again opening a new door for me and expanding my horizons.

SPENCER ELLIS, VIA FACEBOOK

I WILL NEVER be the guy to pass judgment on films he hasn't seen, but boy, did the article on the *Guinea Pig* movies convince me to never see them. I found the descriptions of the movies – and, even more so, Stephen Biro's stated reasons for putting them out in the world – wholly depressing. Simply seeing the "artistry and hard work" that goes into presenting "the murder of a human being" as realistically as possible and selling "fucked-up shit" (Biro's words) to an eager audience seems like such a low bar. I watch horror of many stripes, and certainly some favourites have graphic gore and violence, but extremism for extremism's sake seems pretty vacant. Aim higher, horror community! Happy that *Rue Morgue* continues to cover the full range of the genre, though. It's useful in choosing what to see... and what to skip.

JOEL WICKLUND – CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

THANKS FOR SENDING the reminder email [to renew subscription]. The personal touch from Andrea also saying I would always be welcome and the sentiment was impossible to resist. Love you guys. Been a reader since 2008 when I found *Rue Morgue* at the bookstore as a bike-riding college kid and finally a subscriber this year as a successful tech worker!

BRYAN, VIA INSTAGRAM

IT WAS WITH MUCH interest while scanning the 2022 lineup of film festivals in *RM#204* that one

of the most entertaining and highly rated horror fests was missing. Could it be that the Telluride Horror Show held each October is out of favour with *Rue Morgue* due to its sponsorship by another publication south of the border? Just a thought.

JOEY WOLFE, VIA EMAIL

Hi Joey, thanks for your note. We do our best to be exhaustive with our annual list but some shows were cut due to space constraints, date uncertainties, etc., but never for sponsor affiliation reasons. We wish Telluride Horror Show continuing success! -Ed.



Hellbender's Zelda Adams with *RM#204*.

I HAVE BEEN READING, with regret, the reader comments about the magazine getting too gender political and leftist lately. Is it? Possibly... but I am a faithful subscriber. However, Stacie Ponder's musings lately are definitely gender politicizing parts of the magazine, especially her movie reviews. Really Stacie? There's a difference between your attempts to indoctrinate vs. educate the reader, and to slam all males for the behaviour of a few jerks is not a good path to follow. I say leave your/his/her/they/them/us etc. out of it and concentrate on what a good horror magazine should be about. I now make her negative non-picks a "must see" on my list. Sexual

politics is not a two-way street, it's a multiple intersection where all oncoming traffic should be allowed to now flow safely, with none monopolizing the lanes going forward. I suggest she find a more gender activist venue for her slanted rants, before her negative musings drive away more revenue and readers.

SOLID GOLD – ADDRESS WITHHELD

GREETINGS AND SALUTATIONS! Not sure if it's the new norm, but my latest issue arrived in very sturdy outer packaging. Previously, issues came in just a regular paper-like envelope, and quite often the envelope and magazine would be torn and mangled. With this new packaging, this issue looks direct from the printer, crisp and fresh and new. So thanks for (possibly) seeing and correcting a minor mailing issue. *Rue Morgue*, yet again, for the win! Cheers!

CHRIS H., VIA EMAIL

RE: TERROR TAROT on *Rue Morgue TV* – I was hoping you could ask Laura Hokstad to check her deck to see if there's anything in the cards for, well... me and Laura Hokstad.

KEN NORMAN, VIA EMAIL

RE: KILLER CANUCK covering *Scanners* on *Rue Morgue TV* – I enjoyed this so much! Such an underrated film. It has one of the best twists of all time, in my opinion. Now, if you will excuse me, I'm going to go watch the rest of your work! Keep it up! People need to see the roots of shock horror type movies!

TWO OF A KIND, VIA YOUTUBE

I AM GOING TO reveal how grossly far behind in my reading I am with this tweet, but I found Jessica Buck's piece on horror and the deaf community in *RM#196* really fascinating, especially the parts about the good and bad representation in *A Quiet Place*.

@ALLHALLOWSGEEK, VIA TWITTER

WE ENCOURAGE READERS TO SEND THEIR COMMENTS VIA MAIL OR EMAIL. LETTERS MAY BE EDITED FOR LENGTH AND/OR CONTENT. PLEASE SEND TO INFO@RUE-MORGUE.COM OR:

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1411 DUFFERIN STREET
TORONTO, ONTARIO M6H 4C7 CANADA

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CORONER'S REPORT

WEIRD STATS & MORBID FACTS

ISSUE #
205

The physical appearance of Caligari in 1920's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was inspired by portraits of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer.

Film storyboards for Alejandro Jodorowsky's doomed 1970s version of the movie *Dune* recently sold for \$3 million at auction, about 100 times the expected price.

On June 4, 1923, New York horse jockey Frank Hayes, 22, died of a heart attack mid-race and collapsed on his horse, which nonetheless crossed the finish line first, still carrying his body.

The debut episode of the long-running TV series *Doctor Who* was created in 1963 as "An Unearthly Child" but series creator Sydney Newman ordered that it be reshot in its entirety. The original footage did not see the light of day until almost 30 years later, on June 3, 1991.

An early attempt to have monkeys play the gremlins in the titular 1984 film was abandoned when a test monkey panicked upon being made to wear a gremlin head.

Performer Devon Staples, who played Goofy and *Beauty and the Beast*'s Gaston at Disney World in Orlando, Florida, was killed in 2015 when he attempted to launch fireworks from his head.

Roger Ebert owned a copy of *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) on LaserDisc for years after the film's release, but never watched it because he was intimidated by its graphic content. Reportedly, he died without ever having seen it.

To promote friction between the actors, *The Blair Witch Project* directors deliberately gave them less food each day of shooting.

The close-up of Sadako's eye near the end of 1998's *Ringu* was performed by a male crew member, Norihiko Miyazaki, who cut his eyelashes short to make the shot more disturbing.

Alice Cooper is the godfather of Megadeth frontman Dave Mustaine.

The piano piece "Bach Chaconne in D Minor," which is played by a disembodied left hand in 1946's *The Beast with Five Fingers*, was arranged to be played by the left hand alone by Johannes Brahms.

In David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, the word "fuck" is uttered 56 times, all but once by Frank Booth.

When Dr. Mario Lebrato released a black tip shark back into waters just off the coast of Spain, it was ambushed by other sharks who bit off a large portion of its body. Despite this, the "zombie shark" continued hunting for food for a full twenty minutes before succumbing to its injuries.

COMPILED BY BENOIT BLACK
GOT A WEIRD STAT OR MORBID FACT?
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RECORDING OFFICER

FURTHER ACTION

HOMICIDE

EXPIRING MINDS

ON RUE MORGUE'S SOCIAL MEDIA



If they made a **giallo movie** about your life, what would it be called?

Two Cats on My Case All the Time About Food. Music by Gobblin'.

NICK KAFKA, VIA FACEBOOK

Death Walks in High Heels and Rolls an Ankle.

ELIZABETH SHORT, VIA FACEBOOK

The Killer Wore Sweatpants.

KEVIN LEGG, VIA FACEBOOK

Death Stayed Home (But Felt He Should Have Been Doing Something More).

DAVID SCHMIDT, VIA FACEBOOK

The Black Cat Hit the Snooze Button Seven Times.

RICK WHITING, VIA FACEBOOK

Hungry Eyes of the Concrete Owl. Because it makes no sense.

@SOMEPLAINTME, VIA TWITTER

What Are Those Strange Drops of Iced Coffee on Chris' Body?

@CHRISNASHAWATY, VIA TWITTER

FINAL WORDS

AS CAPTIONED BY YOU ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA



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WADE DAVIS VS THE ZOMBIES

In 1988's *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, Wes Craven delves into

the world of zombies and voodoo in Haiti. The film pulls loosely from Wade Davis' book of the same name that accounts his time in the country, and upon its release Roger Ebert praised the film for exploring voodoo as more than just a gimmick. But given the depth of cultural and socio-political exploration possible on the topic, there's something lost in making a straightforward horror movie out of a premise where horror elements aren't really the most interesting part of the story.

On one hand, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* faithfully follows some of Davis' exploits through his alter ego, Dennis Alan (Bill Pullman). Davis, like Alan, travelled to Haiti to investigate the story of a man who returned to his sister eighteen years after his apparently dead body was buried in their village's small cemetery. The man claimed to have been raised from the dead and enslaved as a zombie on a sugar plantation, and Davis theorized that a drug was used to simulate death and later control the man after digging him up. Through his investigation, Davis found a

concoction that included tetrodotoxin, a poison found in puffer fish that makes someone appear to be dead.

From here Craven diverges from Davis' story and introduces concrete supernatural elements, with an evil police captain (Zakes Mokae) bombarding Alan with all manner of nasty dreams and malevolent spells in an attempt to banish him and tighten his own grip on the community. This shift to the otherworldly makes for some memorable set pieces, but it doesn't quite congeal into something fully satisfying as the horror only scratches the surface of the much more compelling cultural elements.

Per Davis' account, the use of the "zombie drug" was less about a mustache-twirling villain and more about secret societies keeping order. That man who was zombified on a plantation, for instance, was supposedly a deadbeat dad who cheated his brother out of land. Also intriguing is Davis' assertion that the drug itself wouldn't be effective without being tied to a cultural narrative about zombies, which creates an interesting conversation about how our beliefs shape reality.

While there are plenty of interesting aspects in *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, they're ultimately



viewed through the wrong lens both in terms of the adaptation and the source material. Davis was an outsider speculating about a culture with which he's had limited experience, and it should be noted that some of his methods and conclusions were disputed when his story was published. Still, the idea of Haitian zombies is begging for an update by someone who's lived the culture and can truly raise our understanding from the dead.

BRYAN CHRISTOPHER

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...

**Sandra Peabody, Mari from
The Last House on the Left (1972)**

Classically trained stage actress Sandra Peabody had a number of critically acclaimed theatre roles under her belt before she auditioned for a supporting role in Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* in her early twenties. She landed the lead role of Mari Collingwood, but didn't exactly receive prima donna treatment on set – in addition to shooting gruelling outdoor scenes on a tight timeline, co-stars David Hess and Marc Sheffler remained in character between shots, bullying her and even going so far as threatening

to actually harm her to get good footage. She reportedly walked out of the cast screening of the film, horrified by what she saw. Peabody continued her career with a few film and theatre roles before retiring from acting, but not from showbiz – she produced children's television programming and is currently an acting coach and agent in the Los Angeles and Portland, Oregon areas.

ANDREA SUBISSATI



NEEDFUL THINGS

1 TOXIC AVENGER PLUSH CUSHION

\$29.99 USD

Fully licensed by Troma and endorsed by the leisure specialists here at Rue Morgue, Creepy Company's plush *Toxic Avenger* cushion is the perfect snuggle buddy for between moppings! Measuring 16 inches in height, the reverse side is covered with nuclear green nubbins, fit for the toxic waste that is your living room.

Creepycompany.com

2 JAWS 2-PIN SET

\$15 USD

You're gonna need a bigger lapel for this pin set from Mondo! Inspired by the original theatrical poster, this soft enamel pin duo by designer Oliver Barrett features the titular shark and his first victim so you can recreate the iconic scene from the movie.

Mondoshop.com

3 THE EVIL LURKER BOOKMARK

\$29.99 USD

Who says your bookshelf needs to be boring? Keep your fiction collection looking as creepy as its contents with these resin bookmarks that suggest your books are haunted by tiny demonic imps... because, let's face it, they probably are.

Mermaidvenom.com

4 HOW YOU WILL DIE DIE

\$19 CAD

No, that's not a misprint – it's a twenty-sided die that tells you how you will die! "Defenestration," "Dismembered by Yeti," and "Amorous octopus" are just a few of the possibilities fate has in store for you in this 45mm die that comes in a custom velvet dice bag. (There's no mention of COVID-19 on there, we swear!)

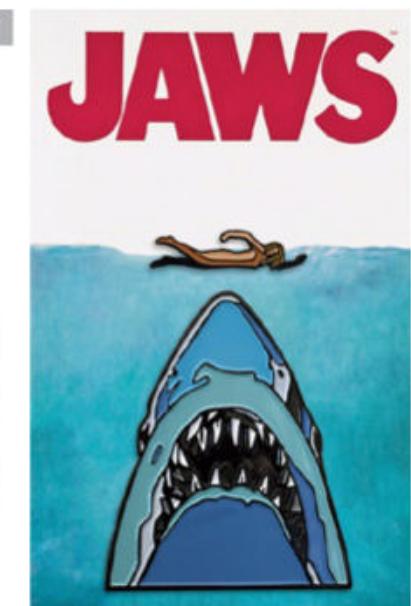
Shop.stormcrow.com

5 A24 GENRE CAR FRESHENERS

\$12 USD

Real movie fans sit in traffic with the aroma of their favourite genre permeating the leatherette interior. Whether you prefer the dulcet notes of thrillers, noir, sci-fi or (duh) horror, A24's fun collab with NY-based perfumer Joya promises a rich sensory experience – not unlike its library of films.

Shop.A24films.com



Cryptic Collectibles

THE PUGLOO FROM PLANET P

A ghastly mash-up of the trendy dog breed and an alien creature from outer space, the Pugloo from Planet P is available in a pair of sizes (two-inch or nine) and two colourways: painted green or “bloo.” The nine-inch version, limited to 500 units, features a rotating head as well as fully articulated wrists, ankles, arms, legs and tail. If they seem familiar to sharp-eyed horror fans, it’s because they were inspired by filmmaker Adam Dougherty (a.k.a. Kreaturekid)’s short film/music video *LIME* before being licensed by former Mondo CEO Justin Ishmael for his collectibles company ISH, and sculpted by Isabel Anderson.

INSPIRATION

“Adam Dougherty/Kreaturekid created Pugloo as a stop-motion maquette and actually made stop-motion sections for the video. I liked it so much that I reached out to him and licensed the character and worked with Adam to make these toys.”

MATERIALS

Vinyl and paint

PRICE

\$20-\$110

FIND IT

Justinishmael.com/collections/toy

CHRIS HAMMOND



Vintage and Classic

THE MASK MAGIC MYSTIC MASK (1961)

Unlike countries such as Germany, the United States, France, and England, which had been producing horror films since the 1920s and '30s, Canada didn't take the plunge until the early '60s, when the country released its first feature-length fright flick – the 1961 black-and-white 3-D shocker *The Mask*.

Directed by former documentary filmmaker Julian Roffman, the movie tells of an ancient skull-like tribal mask that has the power to transform those who wear it into hallucinating, homicidal maniacs. The nightmarish delusions experienced by characters donning the mysterious item are rendered in the third dimension for audience members with

the help of the “Magic Mystic Mask” – a green cardboard mask with red and green lenses that basically acts as a pair of 3-D glasses. Given out to cinemagoers during the film’s original theatrical run, the placard masks were reproduced and handed out to moviegoers again decades later when *The Mask* was restored and screened theatrically in 2015 and included in a DVD release by Kino Lorber. Original 1961 specimens can be found on eBay for around \$50 and up.

JAMES BURRELL

MORE CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES AT RUE-MORGUE.COM



THIS SPRING, FINLAND-BASED HORROR FILMMAKERS HANNA BERGHOLM AND ILJA RAUTSI RELEASE HATCHING, THEIR FEATURE-LENGTH EXPLORATION INTO THE BOND BETWEEN MOTHER AND CHILD... AND THE RESULTS ARE TRAUMATIC

ROTTEN BEGGAR

BY ANDREA SUBISSATI





WE'VE ALL SEEN THAT MOVIE ABOUT A BAD SEED, BUT WHAT ABOUT A BAD EGG – one conceived out of stifling familial smothering, cracking under the pressure of perfection before bringing forth a monster that's as innocent as it is violent? Out March 4 from IFC Midnight, *Hatching* is a rare export from Finland, where director *Hanna Bergholm* and writer *Iija Rautsi* have become the newest creatives to bring Nordic terror to North American audiences.

Titled *Pahanhautoja* in their native land (which translates more literally as "Evil Graves"), *Hatching* tells the story of a young gymnast named Tinja (Siiri Solalinnan) growing up in a domestic pressure cooker of her narcissistic lifestyle-influencer mom (Sophia Heikkilä). As life gradually becomes too much for her to bear, Tinja finds a strange speckled egg in her yard that grows rapidly, compelling her to nurture it in all the ways she needs nurturing herself. The egg grows to enormous proportions before hatching a bizarre human-sized bird that develops into a terrifying reflection of Tinja's internal reality – one as distorted and deformed as her mother's picture-perfect social media feed.

Tinja dubs her oversized hatchling Alli; a fitting name for the creature that quickly becomes an albatross around her neck. The rapidly growing Alli attempts to alleviate some of her surrogate mother's pressures, but its methods are savage and always end in spilled blood, as much from the neighbour's dog as from Tinja's (perceived) human rivals. As her attacks become more vicious, Alli starts to morph into a sick reflection of Tinja's relationship with her own mother, where nurturing maternal instincts are warped into something horrifying, yet unnervingly familiar.

Having studied at the same film school and connected via a Finnish film networking meetup, Bergholm and Rautsi discovered they were birds of a feather, and hatched their first feature film together, from concept to execution. *Rue Morgue* spoke to the duo in January.

Where did the idea for *Hatching* come from?

Iija Rautsi: When I was a child, I had this nightmare that there was an evil doppelgänger of me out there in the world, just doing evil things and coming to my window to taunt me. That was really creepy. I think that's something that was in the background even though I wasn't actively thinking about it while we were writing, but I just had the idea of this egg hatching out a monster that becomes a version of you.

What is it about this project in particular that you wanted for your first feature film?

Hanna Bergholm: I fell in love with Iija's one-liner idea – he contacted me and said that he has an idea that a boy hatches an evil doppelgänger out of an egg, and that's all he knows so far. I said, that's cool, I'm interested in the idea but let's change the lead character into a girl, and then we really started to develop the story together. It was the whole one-line of the story that fascinated me.

Iija: The idea sort of clicked, because of the [cultural] idea that a girl has to be perfect and has to look good and has to do right and can't show any ugly side to themselves. The social code is so different – boys are encouraged to be kind of violent and if a girl does that, then it tends to go the other way, like "what's wrong with you?" and all that "boys will be boys" nonsense that I've always hated.

How did the two of you come to collaborate?

Hanna: Actually, we started way back in the same film school, but we didn't know each other there. And then we met in a directors and screenwriters speed meeting event where you could pitch your ideas and that's how we clicked and noticed that we have a similar way of thinking. We're both very visual and we have the same kind of desire of making stories in a way where we show the world through the main character's experience. And so our ways of storytelling kind of clicked and then we developed the whole story very closely together.

Did you set out to make a horror movie, or was it that the story was best suited to that genre?

Hanna: The thing is, I've always been afraid of horror films, and exactly because of that, I've had such a strong imagination. As a child, I had many imaginary monsters in my wardrobe. But exactly because of that, I've always been interested in fear. What is great about horror films is that inner emotions can take external form in one way or another, so, for me, it wasn't really about wanting to make a horror film. It was that I felt that this type of storytelling is kind of my thing and my way of making films. And I feel that in my short films, and what I've done previously, there tends to be horror elements. It's my way of storytelling.

Can you tell me some of the films that have terrified you?

Hanna: One thing was *A Nightmare on Elm Street* – actually, I didn't see that film, I only saw the poster and after that Freddy was a close companion of

mine.

I saw many images and posters here and there and started to imagine these characters living in my house.

Ilja: I did enjoy *Malignant* a lot, it was a brave swing of making absolutely no sense and playing around with that – it's like three films for the price of one. I also enjoyed *Midsommar* and *Babadook* and *It Follows* and things like this that have been coming out in the last decade. I was twelve when I first saw the 1990 version of Stephen King's *It* and then, because I was a smart kid, I read the book, which was so much worse. I have this clown phobia that's been playing around for over 25 years in my head. I'm kind of jealous of Stephen King that he came up with a concept that's so strong. I mean, I'd have nightmares anyway but now they're just focused on that clown. Then, when I was thirteen, my aunt who lives in England – she knew that I liked horror and she came to my birthday and handed me a VHS of *Hellraiser*. I was staring at Pinhead and I immediately went upstairs and watched the film and came out like, "That's the best film I've ever seen!"

What were some of the challenges shooting the animatronic birdling creature? It's really impressive.

Hanna: Yes, it was! We designed the concept in Finland and I wanted to get the best animatronic designer to build it, so I Googled "the best animatronic designer in the world" and found *Gustav Hoegen*, who's been the lead animatronic designer on *Star Wars [The Force Awakens, The Last Jedi, The Rise of Skywalker and Solo: A Star Wars Story]* and *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* – he's done all of that. So I contacted him and asked him and his team to come along. In the shooting, we had this puppet and Gustav was working with the remote control, moving all the facial expressions and fingers, and we had five puppeteers who had been working on all those *Star Wars* films – they were in these green costumes and moving the puppet with a rod, so it was very interesting. Our footage in editing looked very hilarious with all these puppeteers in the shot!

Hatching invites the audience to wonder if Alli is real, or a manifestation of Tinja's pain. Unlike most horror films in that vein, it falls quite conclusively on one side.

Ilja: Those films where the metaphorical part is also metaphorical inside the film, like *A Monster Calls* or something like that, I can see that they're well made but they just don't do anything for me. For me, the thing has to be real for it to make sense, otherwise I don't think that it has an actual engine, or the metaphor doesn't really work. In *Hatching*, it could be that it's all in



"THE MONSTER IS A PHYSICAL MANIFESTATION OF THE ACTUAL ISSUES, AND I THINK THE METAPHOR IS PURE IF THE MONSTER IS REAL."

– Writer Ilja Rautsi





Bird To Beast: Initially born as a monstrous bird, Alli comes to resemble her surrogate mother Ninja as her bloodlust matures.

Tinja's head right up to the end and we wanted to play around with that a bit, but not lead the audience astray into thinking that it's going to be something like that, because the actual issues that we are dealing with have nothing to do with whether the monster is real or not. The monster is a physical manifestation of the actual issues, and I think the metaphor is pure if the monster is real.

What are the challenges of directing your cast in a piece that is so surreal? Did your lead fully understand what you were trying to make?

Hanna: I think so, yes. We auditioned 1200 girls all around Finland to find our lead girl. She had never acted anywhere before, and so the challenge was really before the shooting, we had long rehearsals of the scenes just for her to get used to the situation and not be afraid. For example, the first rehearsals I had all the professional actors and myself just crawl around the ground, growling like monsters – just for this girl to be comfortable but also scream and so on. At the shooting she was just wonderful. She's a natural talent. For me, the most important thing was that when I was directing her, I was directing only the fictional emotions of this fictional character, and not messing with [Siiri's] emotions; like if she has to play scared, she shouldn't be scared herself, she should feel safe. So that was very important to me, especially when directing a child.

Tell me about the egg mask Ninja's brother wears when he discovers Alli – it also appears on the Finnish poster but only marginally in the film. Why is that?

Ilya: The idea came up for the poster to have them all wear this blank mask because whatever role they're trying to fulfill, they're not a real family in the sense that they don't face each other honestly, and don't allow themselves to see themselves. So the idea of the masks for the

poster just crept in. For the little boy to wear a mask like that [in the film] started out as this idea of how does he deal with this pressure from the mother and the total carte-blanche [attitude] of the father, and then it felt like if he has a mask that makes him [feel] invisible and [with] the rage that he has, that's kind of the way he tries to deal with the pressures of being in this family.

You have a scene where Ninja kills a bird that audiences will surely find upsetting to watch. Why did you consider it important to include that?

Hanna: Yes, that was very important because this is the first time Ninja lets out some of her anxiety and rage. She tries to kill the bird out of mercy, but then she does this very aggressive act and that is the first time something [other than] this nice little mommy's girl comes out of her, and that leads to her finding the egg.

Hatching feels like a movie with a lot to say, but audiences will likely have deeply personal reactions to it. What is it trying to say?

Hanna: It's trying to say that it's horrible if you can't be totally accepted as a full person and as you are. It's also [a warning] about this need to try to control – or find happiness – by controlling your life as you would like to be. Like what this mother is doing; she's portraying this image of her life in social media. And Ninja is controlling the side of herself that she feels her mother doesn't want to see. It's about people who are hiding something and trying to control their life and in the end you can't keep on doing that.

Did you consider any alternate endings?

Ilya: No. It's funny – before I start writing an actual full script, I usually know what the ending is and, with this one, I had absolutely no idea how the hell this is going to end, because you have to kind of solve the dramatic thing, you have to solve the horror/fantasy thing, and you have to

A FINNISH FANTASY

SAMPO

Starring Urho Somersalmi, Anna Oorchko

and Ivan Voronov

Directed by Aleksandr Ptushko

Written by Väinö Kaukonen, Viktor Vitkovich

and Grigori Yagdfeld

Deaf Crocodile

Drawn from 19th-century national epic of Finnish folklore *Kalevala*, Aleksandr Ptushko's phantasmagoric 1959 Soviet-Finnish feature *Sampo* (known as *The Day the Earth Froze* to MST3K fans) is soon to receive a new restoration from Deaf Crocodile as part of its upcoming "Russian Fantastika" collection.

In the land of *Kalevala*, the hard-working Lemminkäinen (Andris Osins) learns that his beloved Annikki (Eve Kivi) has been abducted by a witch named Louhi (Anna Oorchko) through the trickery of her enchanted cloak. Louhi seeks the titular "Sampo" – a mystical mill that produces gold, grain, and salt – which can only be forged by Annikki's brother, the smith Ilmarinen (Ivan Voronov), and uses the fair maiden as a bargaining chip to achieve her wicked ends and attain the Sampo. Lemminkäinen and Ilmarinen arrive in the witch's domain, where the smith forges the miraculous device in exchange for Annikki. But, upon learning that the people of *Kalevala* will never be able to experience the joy and prosperity afforded by the Sampo, Lemminkäinen attempts to destroy it, causing the furious Louhi to steal the kingdom's sun and plunge the land into eternal, icy darkness.

Horror fans will be most familiar with Ptushko through his contributions to Konstantin Ershov and Georgiy Kropachyov's wickedly inventive *Viy* (1967) as a co-writer, art director, and special effects supervisor, but *Sampo* is a hammered steel horse of a different hue. Sometimes referred to as "the Soviet Walt Disney," Ptushko more than lives up to that moniker here, as the film is a grand fantasy yarn in the purest sense with overworked gnomes, fields sprouting with vipers, and all sorts of darkly fantastical derring-do staged amongst the Russo-Finnish wilds and old school, conspicuously theatrical sets.



ROCCO T. THOMPSON



HATCHING SCREENWRITER ILJA RAUTSI PROVES HE IS NO STRANGER TO SATIRE WITH HIS UNIQUE BRAND OF CAUSTIC HORROR SHORTS

HELSINKI HORROR PUNK

BY ANDREA SUBISSATI

PICTURE THIS, FELLOW FRIGHT FANS: YOUNG COUPLE ESSI (ANNA PAAVILAINEN) AND JULIUS (LEO SJÖMAN) DRIVE HOME ON A SNOWY NIGHT AND WIND UP IN A CAR ACCIDENT. They awaken in

a large rural farmhouse whose strange occupants insist they stay the night to recover from their bumps and bruises. When Essi remarks on a *Hellraiser* collectible in the house, its owner is suddenly infuriated, demanding how she could recognize such an item. The other men of the household join in a swarm, spouting unsolicited and uninformed tirades on topics ranging from genre cinema to general life to Essi's own anatomy and female reproduction. Can Essi make it through the night amid all this advice she never asked for? Or in other words, as the short film's tagline puts it, "Who will survive and what will be explained to them?"

You've just been introduced to the mad-hatter satire of *Helsinki Mansplaining Massacre*, the award-winning 2018 short film written and directed by *Hatching* scribe Ilja Rautsi. Inspiration for the film developed as Rautsi not only observed this obnoxious behaviour in the horror community and beyond, but also through some self-reflection.

"I suppose it has to do with being a mansplainer and realizing it at some point," Rautsi tells *Rue Morgue*. "I think it's just stepping outside yourself in certain moments or having people point out to you that you're being an ass. For me, the central thing with the mansplaining film was when I realized that [mansplaining] is about the male ego, which is very fragile;

it's an armour you wear and it doesn't let anything through. If you keep playing to the ego, it has to have validation at any cost – because if you let someone pass that armour then you might get hurt, so it's a protective measure as well."

Despite its psychological aspirations, *Helsinki Mansplaining Massacre* plays out like a punk Sam Raimi tearing through his set with aggressive zooms, canted shots, a smattering of comic and horror elements, and a taste for spurting blood. Even so, the film never loses sight of its message, which takes on ever more bizarre forms as the Helsinki males erupt in a mansplaining frenzy that threatens to blow up in a shower of violence.

"When I was writing, I did ask my friends on Facebook to tell me their worst experiences of mansplaining," says Rautsi, "and one day later I had thirteen pages printed out. That's where the theme of pregnancy and this thing about procreation [came from], because that seems to be something that a lot of men, for no reason, start spouting. Like my friend shared with me this experience when she was pregnant and going to the hospital and the taxi driver was telling her that the pain is only natural – it's amazing what people think they're allowed to say."

Although his home of Finland is better known for heavy metal than horror-comedy, Rautsi is making his mark on the genre with the aforementioned Sawyer-clan homage and his latest short, *Night of the Living Dicks*, a black-and-white tribute to the great grandaddy of late-night zombie fare. Aiming its satirical barbs at another form of toxic male behaviour,

the story concerns Venla (Sonja Kuitinen), who is so inundated by unwelcome dick pics that she starts seeing them literally everywhere.

"In horror, you're allowed to be brutal but also be sad," says Rautsi, "and you can have a really tragic ending and everyone accepts it because it actually seems to work. You can deal with these really heavy emotions and over-the-top atmosphere, and it actually purges you somewhat more strongly than other genres. And I like that [horror] is so tuned to the extreme. It's the same with comedy – if a horror film doesn't scare you, it's laughable, and if a comedy doesn't make you laugh, it's horrifying. You have to be that precise, which is an interesting challenge."

It's a challenge that Rautsi met head-on with writing *Hatching*, a project where he let his satirical side loose skewering social media and powerful bird metaphors. And although he has several directing credits to his name, he passed those duties on the feature to Hanna Bergholm after she suggested a transformational tweak to his script.

"When you're writing and directing, you have to stay open – not only in what you bring out but also what people bring to you," he says. "Especially with directing, I feel like it's more about being a filter than being a dictator. Everybody has good ideas, but are they right for the movie? You're just filtering them towards whatever abstract tone/concept you have in your head, and you have to trust that."

Rautsi is currently making his mark with a number of genre projects that he hopes will help elucidate Finland's dark side for international horror fans. As of print time, he's got several genre-blending irons in the fire, including a horror-comedy feature, a feature based on a classic Finnish sci-fi novel, a "children's sci-fi/adventure/comedy," and another horror fantasy with Bergholm that he describes as having "some thematic continuation of *Hatching*, but a completely different film."

Helsinki Mansplaining Massacre is currently available to stream on Amazon Prime Video in the U.S., and look for *Night of the Living Dicks* to appear on the North American film festival circuit next year. While they're equal parts hilarious and outrageous for audiences on this side of the pond, Rautsi says that *Mansplaining Massacre* hit differently in his native land due to a conspicuous casting choice.

"The guy who's playing the head mansplainer – the grandpa – he's like the biggest star of comedy in Finland from the '70s," he says with a laugh. "He's been playing these really gruff, sloppy men, and then we got him to be the head mansplainer! So in Finland, the film has this other dimension that doesn't really translate abroad."

Helsinki Mansplaining Massacre continues to amass fans, particularly through its 100+ festival screenings where it has also been awarded. Its success, says Rautsi, was directly responsible for *Night of the Living Dicks*.

"I wanted to seize the moment," he says. "Kind of like 'this is the moment where maybe I get to go however crazy I want to go.'"

We can't wait to see what level of crazy awaits us next.



Gunfire And Satire: Ilja Rautsi's short films spoof horror classics with a contemporary, satirical edge.

solve the metaphorical aspect of it, all in one go. So literally, the last day, when I knew I had five or seven pages still to write and I was sitting on the subway, it suddenly [hit me]: "It ends like this." And that's the end that has pretty much stuck through all the development versions.

Do you plan to collaborate again?

Hanna: Actually, yes! We are writing, again, a kind of a horror/drama about a couple who get their first child, and the mother starts to feel that there's something wrong with this child – it's maybe a troll. And [she feels that] because it's not really human, [she has] the right to hate it and it's not [her] fault because there's something wrong with the child. So it tells about this ugly side of love and the difficult emotions of motherhood and how your love can exist at the same time as all this aggression and these difficult feelings that you feel for the child, and what if you don't feel like you actually know the child or love that child? We were laughing that [in *Hatching*] we told the story from Tinja's side and now we'll tell it from the mother's side, but it's a totally different kind of film and totally different style.

Is there a horror movie scene in Finland and what's it like?

Hanna: Actually, before this, we had just a few horror films, and Finland hasn't really been a horror film country at all. But because of that, there was a development workshop that boosted the development of Nordic genre films and that really helped us in a way, because it gave us a lot of good connections and we managed to get this as an international co-production and find great people to work with. I hope *now* Finland becomes more of a genre country as well.

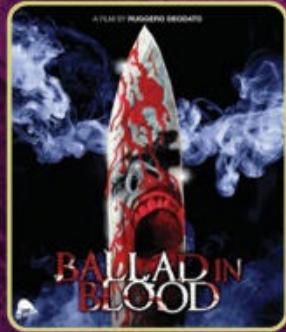
Iija: There's a heavy tradition of realism from Finland all the way through film in history. There's one fantasy horror thing from the '50s [see sidebar] and a couple from the '80s, some cheap things, and then only in the 2000s has there been more of them. Now, it's kind of picking up. There are actually two Finnish horror features that have been shot last year that are also coming out this year, so this is like the biggest year ever for Finnish horror, with three titles coming out! When we were looking for a producer for *Hatching* – it's in the culture, but it's also I think a thing with [Finnish] producers, that the older generation of producers really were not into horror. They didn't grow up with it, they don't like it, they don't watch it, and they don't know it. The funny thing is, we kept hearing this sentence when we were throwing the script to people: they were like, "This is good, but I don't know horror." And then Mika [Ritalahti] who ended up co-producing said the exact same words but in the opposite order: "I don't know horror but this is good, so I'm interested." And then he started to find out about horror and, by the end, he was like, "We need more slime!"



Girls Will Be Ghouls: Hatched under pressure and raised in a web of confusion, Alli becomes a danger to everyone in Tinja's life.

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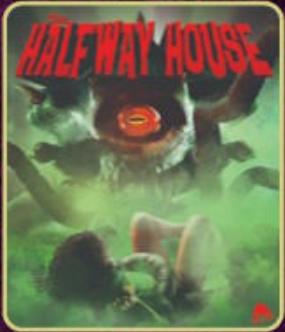
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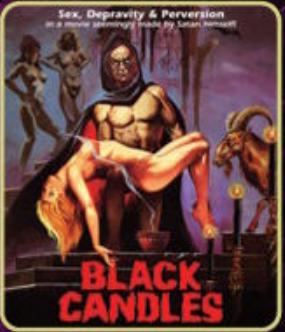
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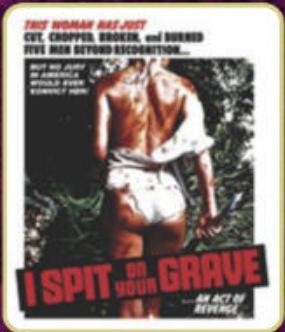
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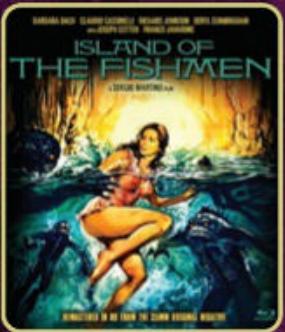
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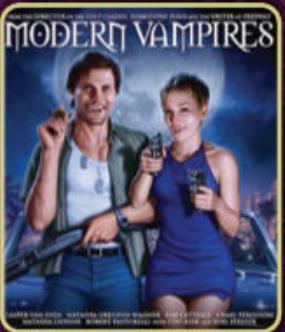
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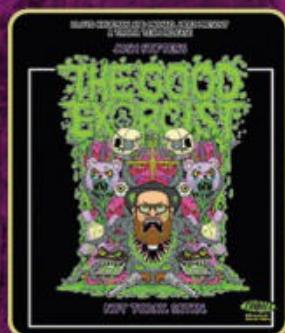
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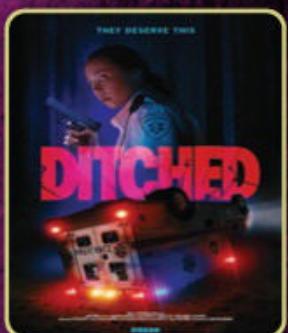
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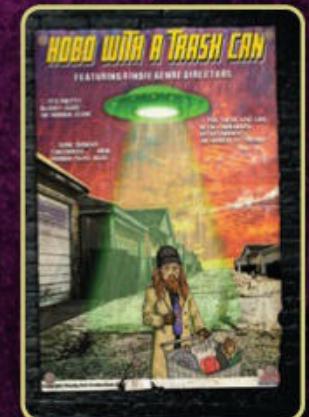
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BENJAMIN CHRISTENSEN'S HÄXAN, A FILM THAT ORIGINALLY CAST ITS SPELL ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, STILL WORKS ITS DARK MAGIC

Häxan of the Century

By
Dejan Ognjanović

A century ago the art of cinema was still young, but becoming ever more conscious of its possibilities. Visionary artists had a fresh, powerful tool at their disposal to paint with, and they used moving images and the flickering interplay between light and dark to portray new, unseen worlds. Some of Europe's greatest filmmakers of the time, though unrelated to one another and without conscious intention, actually brought the nascent horror cinema genre into adulthood by defining the basics of its language. This

was achieved through four distinct masterpieces that premiered within two years from one another, three of which were German. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) exemplified cinema's ability to depict the distorted, irrational world of nightmares, while *The Golem* (1920) embodied the possibilities of expressionistic painting with darkness and shadows, serving as a visual (but also thematic) template for Universal's later horrors. Then came *Nosferatu* (*Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*, 1922) which spread the stylized studio-shot horrors into the real world's exteriors of forests,

castles, mountains, and seas. Finally, 1922 also brought about a film that's as accomplished as it is important, yet in many ways apart from the above – *Häxan*, also known as *Witchcraft Through the Ages*.

It was the third and by far the most ambitious film by the Danish director Benjamin Christensen: so ambitious that it took him more than two years for research and preparation, so demanding that it required a new, special, state-of-the-art studio, so controversial in subject and approach that he could find no backers in Denmark for it, and so he ended up making it with Swedish producers. (As a result, its title remains embedded in history as the Swedish *Häxan*, instead of the Danish *Heksen*.)

By any name, it remains a powerful piece of cinema with a lasting legacy. Its rerelease in 1941 was accompanied by William Sieverts' book *Witchcraft and Superstition Through the Times*. In 1968, it was re-edited by Antony Balch into a version featuring a jazz score and narration by the cult author William S. Burroughs. In 1999, the makers of *The Blair Witch Project* named their production company after it – Haxan Films. The Norwegian black metal band Mayhem used a frame from *Häxan* depicting the Devil for the cover of its 2004 album *Chimera*, and other examples of its influence abound.

But what is it that makes this film still relevant a full century later? Simply put, it was and remains revolutionary in at least three major respects.

Documentary Horror

First of all, *Häxan* was an early, pioneering mixture of horror and documentary. Conceived as a cultural-historic essay on the danger of delusions, it used moving images to describe the gruesome persecution of witches and the causes behind it, including the belief in demons and devils, and the psychological factors that contributed to these beliefs. Yes, the prologue, about worldwide demonologies, may be too general for today's audiences (though modern horror fans can recognize some familiar faces in there, like Pazuzu) and truly, the epilogue about modern-day neuroses aged poorly and was rightfully criticized even upon the film's premiere, but those odds and ends are easily overshadowed by the real meat – its large middle portion, which depicts the medieval superstitions attendant to the witches and how they were dealt with by the officials of the gynocidal society.

The horrors in this concept are twofold: on one hand, the supernatural frights evoked by the flying witches, Sabbaths, and devils, and on the other, the very real, historically attested terrors of torture at the Inquisition. *Häxan* is a “documentary” which obeys the cinematic narrative law of “show, don't tell.” And so, it visualizes both types of horror – surprisingly, with equal success.

Those depictions of ritual re-enactments are



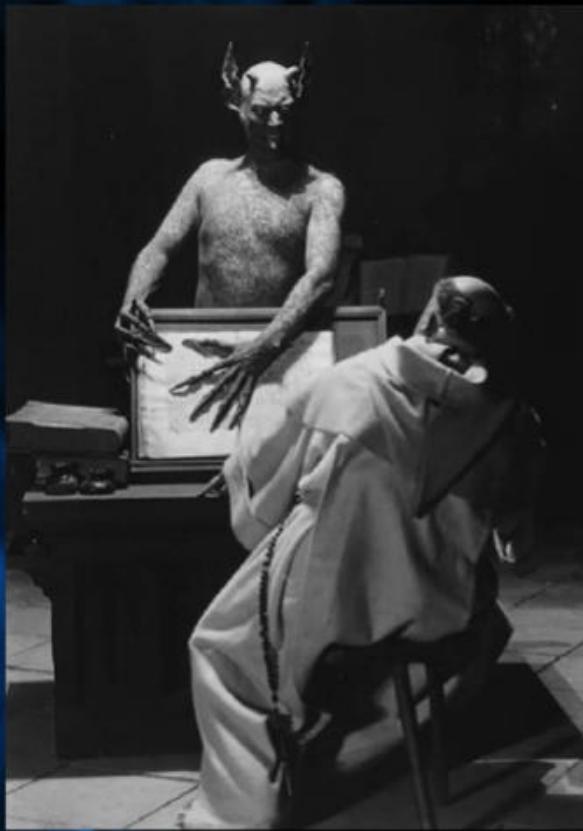
A Cardinal Sin: Ahead of its time both visually and thematically, Benjamin Christensen's unique film remains a cinematic touchstone for the horror genre.

where the real drama and cinema reside: folk magic, strange broths, animal skeletons, human body parts combined with snakes and frogs for potions, the hexing power of urine (!), and so much more, all of it derived from Christensen's research into the old books on demonology. Of note: his main source, the notorious 1487 Inquisitors manual *Malleus Malleficarum* (*Hammer of the Witches*), was not available at the time in mass-market annotated paperbacks, like it is today.

In his aim to be as authentic as possible, the director was aided by the prop master, Richard Louw, who created the sets and torture instru-

ments based on the medieval designs. There is no need to see them in action, as they strike the unfortunate flesh: the very sight of many of those sharp, spiky screws and pliers is enough to send chills down one's spine (modern audiences will remember seeing some of these implements applied in Ken Russell's *The Devils*, 1971).

Also, the investment in a new studio was a risky bet, largely responsible for making *Häxan* the most expensive film made at the time in any Scandinavian country, but it paid off in spades – the meticulous high-contrast lighting and photographic effects created by director of photography Johan Ankerstjerne surpassed all that



The Devil's Advocate: *Häxan*'s portrayal of innocent witches and a sympathetic Satan were outrageous at the time of its release.

Hollywood's expensive bells and whistles could offer at the time. Thanks to Christensen's obsessive, perfectionist attention to detail, *Häxan* remains a first-rate visual feast in all its aspects, whether realistic or phantasmagoric.

Highlights include innovative visual effects of dozens of witches on broomsticks flying above the village to consort with the Devil, and the actual Black Sabbath which includes grotesque demons in convincing full-body costumes, masks and highly effective prosthetic facial makeup for their leering close-ups. The shocking details in this sequence range from female nudity (shocking in its day) through blasphemous acts such as trampling and spitting on the cross and kissing Satan's behind (which many would find offensive, even in this day and age), all the way to that evergreen shocker: the slaughter of a newborn. Of course, the baby that bled out above the steaming cauldron was a puppet, just like it was in *A Serbian Film* ninety years later, but tell that to the appalled audiences lulled by the apparent realism preceding it!

Were it merely a documentary on witchcraft, *Häxan* might've remained a forgotten title, known only to a select few fanatics. Its effectiveness, however, is rooted in the fantastic scenes of the Sabbath, and even more – in the distinct atmosphere of superstition and dark forces at work, even when unseen. Especially when unseen. Christensen created a realistic setting through meticulous set design,

props and costumes which surround skilled actors and their characters' plausible motivations, resulting in a mise-en-scène in which forces of evil can be expected to rise from the shadows at any moment. The sense of an all-pervading paranoia is palpable. These were indeed the Dark Ages, and the director shows why.

Sympathy for the Devil

The second revolutionary aspect of *Häxan* worth stressing is its portrayal of the Devil, depicted here as ambiguous and even sympathetic.

In terms of iconography, the Devil appears with small horns and big, pointed ears, his face and body recognizably humanoid, a long tongue protruding lasciviously from his mouth. Basically, he is the pagan Pan as demonized by the Christians: a deity of carnal pleasure. He is a tempter and a seducer, and all the sins that he instigates in this film have to do with sexuality: a woman buys a love potion from another in order to seduce a friar, a novice is tormented by temptation in his monastic cell, not to mention the Sabbath's orgiastic abandon. The Devil, as

seen here, is hardly supernatural: he is all too natural, arising as he does from the body's basic instincts, an echo of Pinhead's words when he says, "There is no Good, there is no Evil; there is only Flesh."

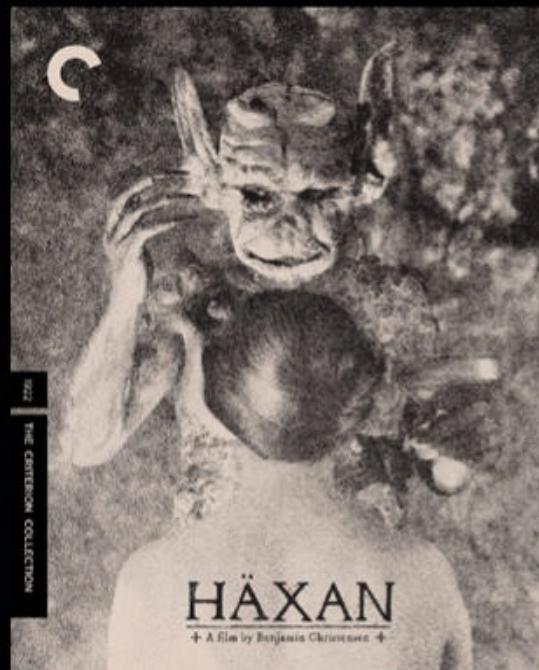
Häxan's Devil is truly different and special; firstly, because he is treated as a metaphor, not

a power actually existing outside of humans and their interrelations. This is most obvious in the fact that the entire Black Sabbath sequence is presented as a "confession" of a clearly innocent old woman, extracted under torture. All the wildly memorable images of *Häxan*'s most celebrated scene come from the testimony of a terrified person, telling her tormentors what they want to hear. In this way, the film is a critical strike against medieval superstition and ignorance, and makes a point of showing the use of potions and ointments as another possible source of "visions" attributed to the Devil. When the crone confesses that her frail old body allegedly gave birth to a host of demons, Christensen shows two grotesque imps (probably children in full-body costumes) crawling from underneath her skirts. It is as if to suggest that if you could believe this, you could believe anything.

Secondly, and more subtly, this film's sympathy for the Devil is expressed in the fact that he is played by none other than the director himself – and quite memorably so. His sudden appearance from pitch-blackness, behind a book that an abbot is reading, is one of the most effective jump-scares of all time. He is all at once lewd, playful, and provocative, a master entertainer. He is the one that guarantees ticket sales, not the pious priests – none of whom appear in this anticlerical film anyway. And our master of ceremonies, Christensen, clearly embraces the exploitation behind his lectures and entertainment behind his sermons, identifying with the archetypal rebel and admitting, as William Blake did writing about Milton, with his meta-cinematic wink, that all artists are "of the Devil's party."

Sympathy for the Witch

Unlike many of his contemporaries, such as the scholar Montague Summers or author H.P.



AS HÄXAN CELEBRATES ITS CENTENNIAL IN 2022, RUE MORGUE TRACES THE MANY ATTEMPTS OVER THE PAST 100 YEARS TO LEND SOUND TO ITS STUNNING VISUALS

Shattered Silence

by Aaron Von Lupton

As with *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*, *Phantom of the Opera*, or any other number of silent horror films, the score for 1922's *Häxan* (released in the U.S. as *Witchcraft Through the Ages* in 1968) has a bit of a murky history, what with it originally requiring a live musical accompaniment, not a pre-recording. And like those other black-and-white classics, *Häxan*'s music has been the subject of much interpretation and reinvention, with numerous artists creating original musical compositions for the film's various physical media releases and live screenings over the years.

To this day, no one knows for sure what music was used for *Häxan*'s world premiere in Stockholm on September 18, 1922, but it's widely assumed to have been the same 50-piece orchestra used for its Copenhagen premiere the following November, borrowing bits from Franz Schubert's "Rosamunde Overture," selections from Christoph Willibald Gluck's opera *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and Max Bruch's "Kol Nidrei." That said, it's still a mystery which sections of music were used, the order in which they were used, and perhaps, most importantly, exactly what scenes they were used in.

Enter film music specialist Gillian Anderson, who had previously constructed a rescore of *Nosferatu* (see RM#196), to try to piece something together for the 2002 Criterion Collection DVD release. As it turns out, playing the tracks in the order presented in the Copenhagen premiere program worked quite well. Schubert's "Rosamunde Overture" provides a great backdrop as witches take off on brooms, and Gluck's "Iphigenia in Aulis" provides just enough intensity for the mad nun's dance sequence.

Carrying a raw power that stands as the emotional counterpoint to the on-screen drama, it can be assumed that Anderson's rescore is the best representation of writer/director Benjamin Christensen's vision that we're going to get. Regardless of how it was used in the original live screenings, Christensen was reportedly quite pleased with the music selections, declaring after the Copenhagen screening: "It is quite simply the best musical arrangement I have ever heard for a film!"

Prior to Criterion's restoration, *Häxan* was best known by its stateside

name *Witchcraft Through the Ages*, thanks to a re-edited and re-released cut from Metro Pictures Corporation in the U.S. In place of the original musical selections is a jazz score by Swiss percussionist Daniel Humair. Abrasive and junky compared to the lush orchestrations of the original cut, the music nonetheless captures the spirit of the onscreen paganism well – let's not forget the rebellious and even satanic overtones of jazz music! Humair's score is likely the one most often heard due to its frequent appearances on *Häxan*'s physical releases.

Not surprisingly, numerous other scores have been written and performed by all kinds of artists over the years. Saskatoon-based outfit The Garrys composed a more organic sounding score using (mostly) guitar, bass, and drums, recording it live on October 25, 2019, at The Roxy Theatre in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Treaty 6 territory. Artist Geoffrey Smith, renowned for his mastery of the hammered dulcimer (a percussion instrument struck by small wooden hammers), had previously composed a score for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, and released an obviously even more subdued score for *Häxan* that was included on Tartan Films' 2007 DVD release.

Speaking of that Tartan release, also included as a soundtrack option was a new score by UK electronic group Bronnt Industries Kapital, also released on CD by Static Caravan Recordings in 2008. Dreamy and atmospheric, this score eschews *Häxan*'s orchestral origins for something closer to Tangerine Dream. Elsewhere, horror film score-influenced artists Cemetery Gates released a synth-heavy accompaniment through Lake-shore Records in 2019, and perhaps, most recently, Canadian composer and multi-instrumentalist Alia Synesthesia independently released an operatic take on the score this past November.

There are likely countless other musical interpretations that serve as *Häxan*'s musical accompaniment, a testament to the power of its sinister visuals that continue to inspire. Whether the film's lasting impact is derived from its horrific visuals or its tragic echo in history, music will always drive the witches' hammer home in *Häxan*. ☠

Lovecraft, Christensen did not buy into any of the nonsense extracted under torture and verified as “fact” by the torturers. In his enlightened, positivist perspective, quite rare among filmmakers of the early 1920s, the witches were not perpetrators of evil, but clearly victims: sometimes of their own faults and delusions, but more often of other people’s malevolence. Predating Michael Reeves’ *Witchfinder General* (1968) by almost half a century, Christensen realistically depicts all the phases of the process, from a false accusation, through sadistic torture to execution. Furthermore, he makes the unfortunate woman’s plight even more touching by casting an old lady (non-actor, but with a highly expressive face) in the role of the “witch.” He refused to exploit the sadistic spectacle of a nubile young woman suffering that many others would cash in on later (e.g. *Mark of the Devil*, 1970) and selected a person who could not possibly be guilty of anything so heinous.

As it happens so often with filmmakers dealing with extreme, explicit imagery, his agenda was not immediately recognized, and as with Ruggero Deodato and Srdjan Spasojevic much later, Christensen was accused of advocating precisely that which he condemned. The daily paper *Social-Demokraten* wrote after *Häxan*’s premiere: “Many of the images exude such raw realism that the dominating reaction is one of nausea. The viewer suffers the torments along with the victims on the screen. The film seems itself a product of the beastliness, torture, bonfires and insanity that it means to critique.”

Basically, the film was condemned for being too powerful – that is, too cinematic. Its images were too strong, and this caused it many troubles. In English-speaking countries, no one dared show the movie for many years. *The New York Times* at least recognized that it was ahead of its time when it wrote: “Come back with your film in 25 years, Mr. Christensen, and maybe then America will be mature enough to understand your art.”

“After *Häxan*,” Christensen would recall, “I was out in the cold for two years. When I finally got a chance at UFA, I had to disprove that I was this ‘literary experimentalist’ that everybody said I was, and so I made these purely commercial films.”

While *Häxan* did not actually end his career the way that, say, *Peeping Tom* (1960) would do to Michael Powell, its director was relegated to conventional films, now rightly forgotten, a partial exception being his decent Hollywood-made horror thriller *Seven Footprints to Satan* (1929). However, the power of *Häxan* was not repeated. But making even one film that is so incomparable to any other is more than most directors can ever dream of.

“It is a state of bliss,” Christensen would later say, “for an artist once in his lifetime to get permission to do what he wants. That happened with *Häxan*. ”



“Many of the images exude such raw realism that the dominating reaction is one of nausea. The viewer suffers the torments along with the victims on the screen. The film seems itself a product of the beastliness, torture, bonfires and insanity that it means to critique.”

Social-Demokraten review of *Häxan* (published in 1922)



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POETRY MAY NOT BE THE FIRST THING THAT COMES TO MIND WHEN SOMEONE SAYS "HORROR," BUT HORROR POETRY IS THRIVING

Darkest Verse

BY MONICA S. KUEBLER



SOME OF HORROR'S MOST CELEBRATED CLASSIC WORKS ARE POEMS. One need look no further than the contributions of Edgar Allan Poe, which have escaped the confines of the genre and bled into the public consciousness. Still, oftentimes when someone brings up horror poetry, eyes immediately glaze over, perhaps recalling painful high school English classes and the equally painful "dark" poems those hormone-fuelled years produced. It's an unfortunate and misguided reaction, given that speculative poetry is uniquely suited for marrying the gorgeous with the grotesque, while also tackling difficult issues on a profoundly emotional and visceral level. That's not to say it's all serious stuff, however. Contemporary horror poetry is nothing if not versatile, encompassing everything from clever rhymes about our favourite monsters to complex, free verse explorations of personal and societal decay to howls of grief and anger born from the darkest corners of its writers' souls. Its variety likely comes down to the fact that those two words mean something different to everyone, including its own practitioners.

"For me, horror poetry invokes dread or unsettles or even frightens a reader," says Toni Miller, co-editor of *Under Her Skin: A Women in Horror Poetry Collection, Volume 1*. "It doesn't necessarily have to do with gore or monsters, but comes more from the actual feeling (and emotional response) the poem gives me."

Her co-editor, Lindy Ryan, describes it as dark, dreadful, and lyrical, adding that "it's less a matter of form or meter, but it's the poem's ability to *horrify* the reader that makes it 'horror poetry' – be it gory, gritty, or just plain unsettling."

Meanwhile, Stephanie M. Wytovich, editor of *Hror Writers Association Poetry Showcase Volume VIII*, approaches the subject from a slightly different angle.

"I've always looked at horror poetry as a small snapshot into a nightmare," she says. "It's not a full story or a complex arc, but a piece of the puzzle, an image that sticks with you, haunts you, and that makes you feel something quickly and intensely (for better or worse)."

If there's one inarguable takeaway from this, it's

that good horror poetry makes the reader *feel*. That's certainly true of the poems in *Under Her Skin, Poetry Showcase Vol. VIII* and *Where Decay Sleeps* (see sidebar), and a lot of that is down to the myriad ways in which the art form has evolved in the 170-some years since "The Raven" was published in January 1845.

"The genre has evolved as human society has evolved," notes Miller. "Many of the themes that are being written about now are highly evocative to today's society. This is not to say that they didn't deal with the same issues in Poe's time, but they weren't really written about – or at least not in society's eye."

Ryan adds: "Evolution is a great word for the way horror poetry has grown and reshaped over the years. I'd like to think – I'd like to suggest – that poets like Poe paved the way for what horror poetry is today, giving license for modern poets to use the art form not solely for lovely romantic verse, but to explore other, darker, emotions and experiences. Even the most horrific of topics can still make for beautiful poems."

Under Her Skin (out April 5 from Black Spot Books), which features a foreword from award-winning horror poet Linda D. Addison, illustrates this well, pairing body horror with verse to explore a range of topics personal to the female experience, including the endless and sometimes surgical quest for unattainable beauty, the inherent and catastrophic violence of abusive relationships and societal expectations, and the frightening transformation(s) of motherhood.

"We wanted to amplify the voices of women and femmes in horror, and build a collection that spoke in a really intimate way toward the same," says Ryan.

When Tabatha Wood writes in "Her," *Under Her Skin*'s opening poem, that "there's a hole in the world where the rot gets in/engraved in blood and bone./You placed your lips around it and sucked

it dry," you get a sense of the feminine anguish trapped in these pages. The pieces aren't always quite that lyrical, sometimes taking the form of chunky paragraphs, as in Tiffany Meuret's "Acceptable Femme," which uses the layers of the skin to present a more experimental piece skewering plastic surgery and other beauty treatments.

Under Her Skin also features striking cover artwork by Lynne Hansen, compelling graphic design courtesy of Najla and Nada Qamber, and a number of black-and-white interior illustrations by Marge Simon (see opposite page) that complement the 69 poems and complete the package.

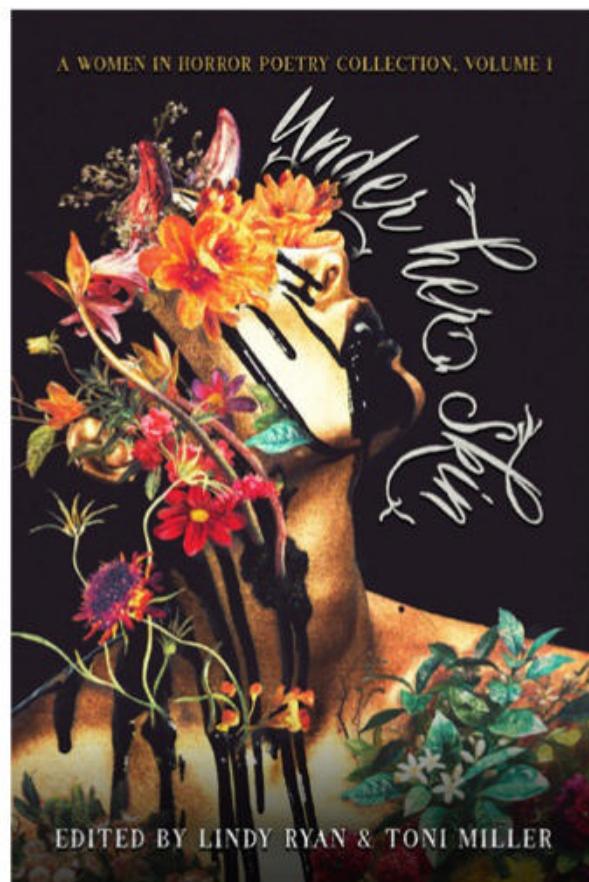
While the aims of *Poetry Showcase Volume VIII* (out now) may be markedly different, the works represented in its pages are no less notable or intriguing, providing a good survey of the wide range of poetic styles, techniques, and subjects utilized by modern-day practitioners of the craft.

"One of the beautiful things about contemporary poetry is that we can learn from the classics and the masters while still putting our own spin on things," notes editor Wytovich, who will also be editing the upcoming craft book from Raw Dog Screaming Press on horror poetry, *Writing Poetry in the Dark*. "I've seen a lot more experimental forms and approaches over the past few years, but most notably so, I think we're living in a

time where free verse and spoken word are having their moment in the sun."

Of course, these are also incredibly uncertain times, so it's no surprise that recent events have influenced the art being produced. Poetry being no exception. Wytovich, a poet herself, has served as *Showcase*'s editor for the last four annual editions and has noticed subtle changes in the submissions as the COVID-19 pandemic has dragged on, waxing and waning and forever injecting insecurity into everyone's lives.

"The poems have certainly gotten more introspective and raw, and there's been this mixture of the beautiful and grotesque woven throughout



Monstrous Lines

WHERE DECAY SLEEPS

Anna Cheung
Haunt Publishing

Glasgow, Scotland-based poet Anna Cheung's debut collection begins with four pages of content warnings. If that's not your thing, just flip past, and prepare to behold the strange and spooky wonders within. The book is divided into seven thematic sections, each representing a stage of decay: Pallor Mortis (Birth), Algor Mortis (Digital Disruptions), Rigor Mortis (Psyche), Livor Mortis (Loss), Putrefaction (Cravings), Decomposition (Beauty), and Skeletonisation (Metamorphosis).

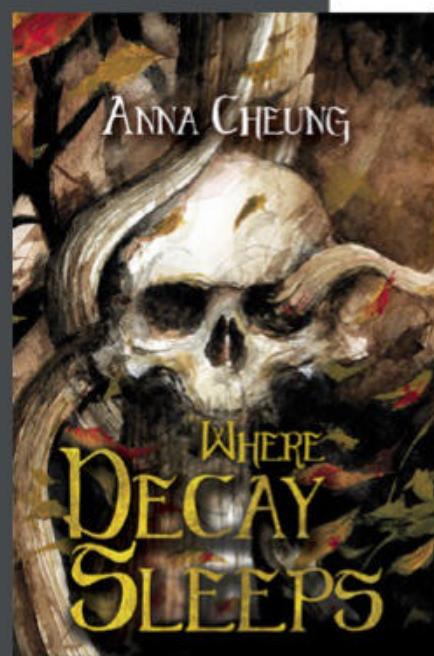
Pallor Mortis opens with "In Utero," a poem about the progression of pregnancy through C-section that would be perfectly at home in *Under Her Skin* (see main), and later gives us "Corpses Bloom" about a less natural sort of birth (or rather, rebirth), and three others.

Algor Mortis delivers us into the urban unease of "The Thing on the Subway" and "Zombies @ the Arches" and introduces us to "Monster Tinder" ("I'll lay footprints, white and silent深深 in your heart/Bigfoot/Swipe left"), before "Summoning Baba Yaga" and engaging in "Computer Love," both short horror tales told in poem form (Cheung excels at this).

Rigor Mortis is the domain of demons ("Shadow") and ghosts ("The Faceless Man"). It's also where the author loses herself ("Hikikomori"), where "Beatrice and Bluebeard" live, where "Decay, The Stalker" lies ever in wait, and the location of "COVID-19 Delirium."

The remaining four sections follow similar beats, mixing the real and the fantastical, but Cheung's poems never grow tedious or overstay their welcome. An undeniably talented poet, she varies her style as necessary to achieve the exact poetic effect she seeks, whether that be through structured verse, a particular layout (see "Artificial Werewolf" in Skeletonisation), or other literary techniques. The transformation in "Office Metamorphosis," for example, is poignant and unforgettable, as powerful as anything in a more traditional prose story.

As a debut, *Where Decay Sleeps* is startlingly polished and confident, and well worth seeking out for any fan of monstrous verse. With it, Cheung secures her well-earned place as a name to watch.



MONICA S. KUEBLER

"HORROR POETRY IS THRIVING IN THE DIGITAL AGE."

Stephanie M. Wytovich, editor HWA Poetry Showcase Vol. VIII

that comments on all the very real horrors we're living through and collectively experiencing," she says. "You know, usually with horror poetry, you expect to read a lot about death and grief, but the work that has come through has been honest in a way that I haven't seen before and maybe that's again because we're all in this state of mourning in one way or another, but the writing has certainly felt more emotionally charged and visceral lately, especially when it comes to poems focusing on the body, the home, or one's psychological state."

In *Poetry Showcase Volume VIII*, this is borne out in poems such as the book's opener "Cherry Blossoms (On Mourning a Distant Mother)" that ends with the haunting lines "Each year more desolate, an inching lonely mile, I count/twenty reasons we walked that narrow path. Each, a mistake"; in the home and hearth spellcraft of Cynthia Pelayo's "Lucky Charm" that declares mid-poem that "you and your death are my good luck charm/Like a desiccated cat lined within the walls of a new/Home to ward away evil spirits"; and the harsh reality of Vince A. Liaguno's "Visiting Hours," where the aged are "Sequestered/within pandemic pandemonium/where snippets of worry filter through the

air/like the microscopic contagions/that seek entry through masked cavities."

And poetry isn't just alive and well in print. While the arrival of the internet has had an undeniably disruptive effect on virtually every form of art, it appears that poetry may have fared better than most.

"Horror poetry is thriving in the digital age," explains Wytovich, "and I think so much of that is because we're able to share bits and pieces of what we're working on and/or promote our work in a way that reaches a wider audience, whether that's through sharing a line and a link here, a turn of phrase and a picture there. It's just become more accessible, which I think is the most important piece of the puzzle here because for so long, poetry was looked at as this elitist form of writing



that wasn't digestible to most readers. That's not to say that poetry can't be or isn't complex and elevated, but I do think speculative poetry is tapping into something more relatable and energizing to genre fans that's allowing and encouraging readers to break out of their comfort zone and read more diversely. It's my hope that this pattern will only continue to flourish, and I look forward to seeing what dark poetry has in store for all of us in the future." ☠



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RUE MORGUE SALUTES THE PHANTASMAGORIC LIFE
AND ART OF VERNE LANGDON

ONE MAN CARNIVAL

By HEATHER DRAIN

ON A PITCH-BLACK NIGHT, THE SOLE BEACON OF CANDY-COLOURED LIGHT CAN BE SEEN FROM A DISTANCE. The sight of the red-and-white striped circus tent beckons, though the scent of hot buttery popcorn and fried sugary dough doesn't hurt. The paper ticket is a key to a whole other world. The carnival is packed with characters of the likes you have never seen: grease-painted clowns with wide red smiles, a mysterious organist playing music ripe with eerie enchantment, a top-hat-adorned magician effortlessly bending all rules of logic and reality, and what's that over there? A white-blond strongman battling a giant, manic gorilla?! Moving closer to the ring, you realize that the gorilla has the same pale blue eyes as every mysterious towering figure you have encountered... even the wrestler he's grappling with! What manner of man could embody every one of these vast roles in such a phantasmagoric circus?

Verne Langdon, that's who.

If Lon Chaney Sr. was the man with a thousand faces, Langdon was and forever remains the man with a thousand aces. He was that rare character that was a veritable Swiss Army knife of skills and made a deep imprint with every function he ran. From monster-mask maker to makeup inno-

vator to musician, circus clown, magician, writer, brothel pianist, radio DJ, and even professional wrestler, Vernon Loring Langdon did all of this and more during his time on this mercurial realm of existence.

Born in 1942 in Oakland, California, young Langdon was all but hatched into this world with something creative and special in his blood. His father was a dentist by trade who knew Gorgeous George, the bleached-blond wrestling legend whose valet would famously perfume the ring. His mother was a cellist who played everywhere from vaudeville to NBC radio. But it was his uncle, Red Nichols, a respected early jazz musician who worked with the likes of Benny Goodman and Gene Krupa, that made the biggest impression. When most tykes are coming to grips with potty training and walking, Langdon was crawling up the piano bench and picking out melodies by ear.

But there was more than music that grabbed the attention of Langdon. It was at age nine, when he spotted a chimp mask created by Don Post Studios, that a key creative seed was planted. Fast forward to 1963, with Langdon becoming partner and part-owner of Don Post Studios. Post had been in the mask-making biz since 1938 and was one of the pioneers of over-the-head costume masks. Before Langdon entered the picture,

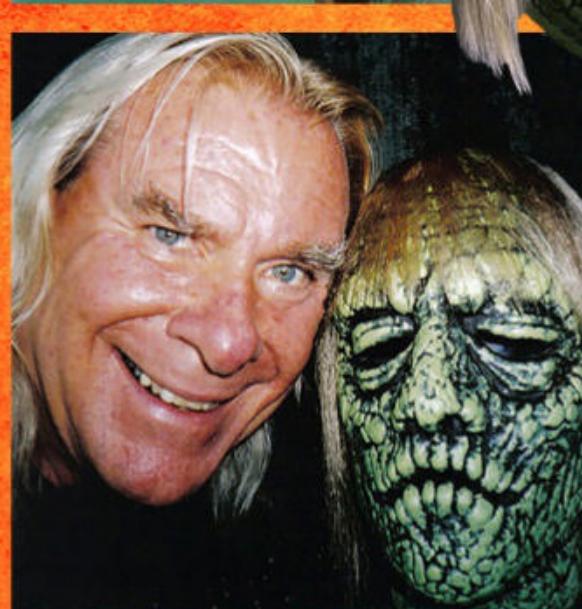
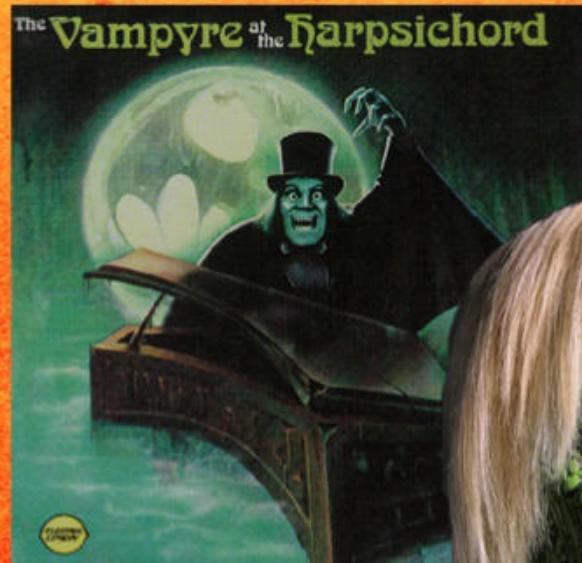
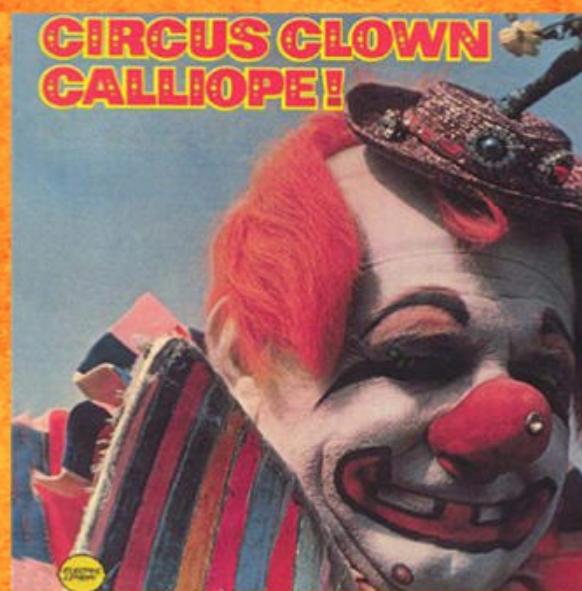
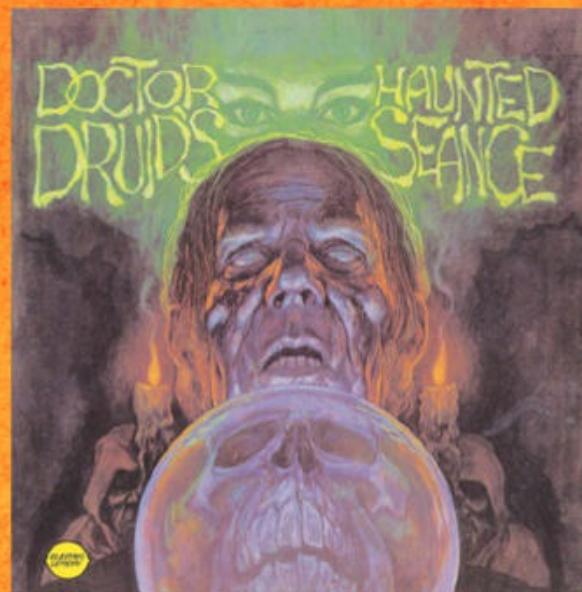
Post's masks were less sinister than satirical, with some of his popular creations ranging from clowns and flappers to political figures like Mussolini and Hitler. The one exception was Frankenstein's monster, but with Langdon joining the fold, a golden era of monster masks was ushered in. With creativity, knuckle-grease, and even actual life casts of the actors that brought some of our most cherished ghouls to life, Langdon's era at Post gave us masks of Bela Lugosi's Dracula, Chaney Jr's The Wolfman, and even *Plan 9 From Outer Space*'s heavy, the Super Swedish Angel himself, Tor Johnson. In fact, Tor would end up being one of the company's best sellers. (Fittingly, Johnson was also one of Langdon's two main wrestling trainers, along with The Fabulous Moolah.)

Much has been written over the years, including by Langdon himself, about his time with Don Post Studios, its association with Forrest Ackerman and his seminal monster kid mag *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, but the truly fascinating aspect of his creative legacy lies just as much, if not even more so, with his music.

In the 1960s, Langdon became a friend and associate of Milt Larsen, a magician and creator of the Magic Castle, a famous private club for practitioners and lovers of the illusory arts. Larsen, Ackerman, and Langdon all worked together with Boris Karloff in 1967 for *An Evening with Boris Karloff and His Friends*, an album that featured the actor narrating clips from *Dracula* (1931), *The Mummy* (1932), *The Wolf Man* (1941), *Frankenstein* (1931) and its classic sequels. (The gloriously Gothic cover art features an inset photo of the Post-created Frankie mask.) After the Lugosi estate threatened legal action for sampling the late actor's voice, the album was pulled out of circulation.

In the meantime, Langdon recorded a soundtrack to accompany the "Houdini Seances" held at the Magic Castle. This would help set into motion his first solo album, 1973's *The Phantom of the Organ*. The sounds created here accurately capture the macabre lushness, horror, and melancholy of both Gaston Leroux's 1909 novel *The Phantom of the Opera* and the 1925 film adaptation. The latter is beautifully represented on the cover, courtesy of comic book illustrator Bob Juanillo.

Also in '73, Langdon released *Circus Clown Calliope!* and *Doctor Druid's Haunted Seance*; one tying into his background as a circus clown and one-time makeup teacher for Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey, and the other replicating the ritual and atmosphere of summoning the dead. The latter is an eerie charmer of a work, complete with some utterly ethereal artwork from legendary illustrator and production designer Ron Cobb, whose resume also includes *Dark Star* (1974), *Star Wars* (1977), and *Alien* (1979), among many others. *Doctor Druid* also came with actual "seance instructions," while the back cover name-checks practitioners



such as Madame Blavatsky and Aleister Crowley. Even better, especially if you're wanting to scare any hyper-religious aunts, there's a warning that

reads, "... responsibility of any psychic phenomenon which may occur... as a result of playing this record will not be assumed by the manufacturer." The manufacturer in question? Electric Lemon Records, founded by Larsen himself with Langdon.

The following year saw the triple-threat release of Langdon's *The Vampyre at the Harpsichord*, *Music for Magicians*, and the second volume of *Circus Clown Calliope!* *The Vampyre at the Harpsichord* is an evocative work that accurately sounds like eternal romance created in a sepulchre. Keep in mind: most music associated with the horror genre at that point was tied to novelty songs. The fact that a number of Langdon's albums from this period were often sold at Disneyland/Disney World, via ads in *Famous Monsters*, and yes, at novelty shops, highlights this fact. But it's easier to write and release a love song safe for the status quo than it is to accurately capture the mood of the supernatural, macabre, or whimsical. The world-building that Langdon did via albums like *Vampyre* and especially *Music for Magicians* is nothing short of breathtaking.

Music for Magicians also sports some of Cobb's gorgeous illustration work, with the art depicting a commanding mustachioed man complete with cape and Caligari-stance while his teal-hued presence is flanked by orange-red gargoyles. Luckily for the listener, the music is equally arresting, sounding like an all-encompassing tour of an old mansion housing rooms of spectral beauty, dancing skeletons, and feats of wonder that transcend our drab, earthly world. From a man that mastered many things, *Music for Magicians* is a masterwork.

Never one to sit idle, Langdon would go on to create the *Castle Dracula* special-effects show at Universal Studios; was brought on by makeup maestro John Chambers to work on *Planet of the Apes* (a gig that would stretch into the next four sequels); play piano for silent film screenings; and in 1989

opened Slammers Gym. Slammers was not only a training ground for up-and-coming professional wrestlers, but also a site for indie matches and even a partial wrestling museum. Langdon could even whip up one mean Zombie cocktail, no doubt inspired by his cult classic Zombie mask featuring a green-hued, scaly-faced member of the undead complete with a pale-blond pageboy haircut.

Langdon passed away on New Year's Day 2011 due to natural causes, but his one-of-a-kind vision left a sense of wonder that permeates the white-hot spotlight of the stage, the makeup room in a theatre or soundstage, the recording studio, and the misty shadows of a vampire-riden castle...

Mr. Langdon, we salute you! ☠

CINEMACABRE

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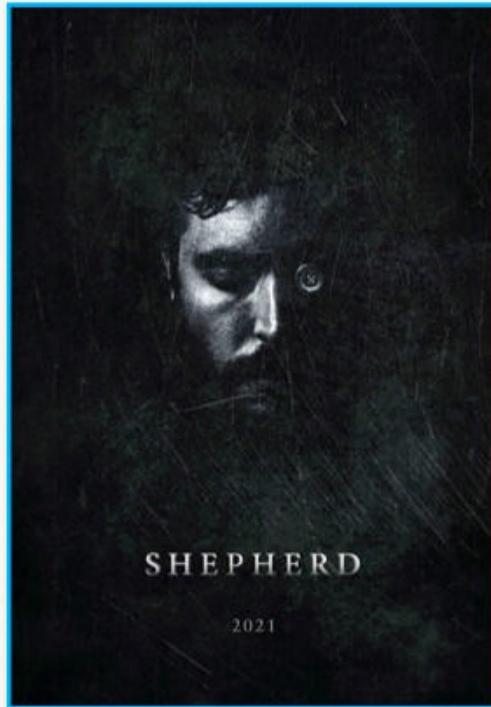
WOLVES WITHIN

SHEPHERD

Starring Tom Hughes, Kate Dickie and Greta Scacchi
Written and directed by Russell Owen
Saban Films

They say no man is an island, but it's easy to feel like one sometimes – like when your adulterous pregnant wife dies, leaving you with more than a little emotional baggage. This is the story of *Shepherd*, where Eric (Tom Hughes) is reeling from the loss of Rachel (Gaia Weiss), who not only stomped on his heart but drove a wedge between him and his family, leaving him a widow and a complete fucking mess.

After a failed attempt to reconcile with his mom (Greta Scacchi) and a botched attempted suicide, an ad in the newspaper for a long-term, live-in shepherd position catches Eric's eye. Figuring that some solitude is appropriate therapy (punishment?) for his agonized headspace, he packs up his dog Baxter and the pair are ferried by one-eyed mariner/amateur bird taxidermist Fisher



(Kate Dickie) to a picturesque mountain island in the Scottish Highlands. Fisher leaves him with a map, a journal, and a key to the dilapidated cottage that Eric will call home, but once alone, it isn't long before his fractured psyche begins to torment him with paranoia, acrophobia, and terrifying hallucinations that blur the line between his vivid nightmares and bleak new reality.

Shepherd is sure to draw comparison with Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse*, but if the latter is a slow-burn, the former is a turtle on ketamine. Still, you're unlikely to forget your purgatorial stint on *Shepherd* island with its stunning vistas and impeccable visual effects. The rustic setting and complete lack of modern technology makes the story feel somehow outside of this timeline; a cinematic escape to a place that's no less hostile, but perhaps more honestly so. And if the symbols and metaphors don't always land, there's

enough (stuffed) red herrings to keep you interested and in line with the herd.

ANDREA SUBISSATI

ALONE ON A CROWDED BROOM

HELLBENDER

Starring Zelda Adams, Toby Poser and Lulu Adams
Written and directed by John Adams, Zelda Adams and Toby Poser
Yellow Veil Pictures

Hell – as preeminent 21st-century chronicler of the adolescent experience Diablo Cody puts it – is a teenage girl, but in the Shudder Exclusive *Hellbender*, liberation and damnation don't just look alike: they may very well be one and the same.

Zelda Adams stars as Izzy, who lives an isolated existence with her mother (Toby Poser), playing rock music and subsisting on moss, roots, and fungus in their white-washed farmhouse nestled upon a heavily forested mountain. Removed from society since the age of five, Izzy believes herself to be too sick to interact with the outside world until a chance encounter with the free-spirited Amber (Lulu Adams) unleashes ferocious powers within her. She soon learns that she is descended from an ancient lineage of feral female spellcasters and, despite her mother's desire to curtail that nature



in herself and her daughter, Izzy is compelled to forge her own path.

As the second horror feature from the Adams family (read all about 'em in *RM#204*), *Hellbender* suffers from a few growing pains. Making stunning use of the area surrounding their Catskills home as well as footage captured in the Oregon rainforests and thermal baths during the family's recent cross-country, COVID-inspired odyssey, the film jettisons the tightening noose narrative and haunting ironies of their previous effort, 2019's *The Deeper You Dig*, in favour of a more freestyle ink blot portrait of the shapeless ennui of isolation and the terror/elation of self-discovery. But for what it lacks in structure, it more than makes up for with its expressive punk rock musicality, vibrant nightmare visions, and flawless central performances from Adams and Poser that draw from their real-life bond and help put some toothsome red meat on *Hellbender*'s sun-bleached bones.

ROCCO T. THOMPSON

BE VERY AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

BARBARIANS

Starring Iwan Rheon, Tom Cullen and Catalina Sandino Moreno
Written and directed by Charles Dorfman
Buckland

Stop me if you've heard this one, or rather, if it sounds like a stage play you've already seen. Two upwardly mobile couples get together for a dinner party and old resentments bubble to the surface, threatening to harsh the buzz; before long, newer, deeper wounds are ripped open as things continue to spiral southward. If this sounds to you like we're in Edward Albee territory, or maybe Eugene O'Neill or Tom Stoppard, you're probably not alone. But then – then – just as the proceedings reach new levels of nastiness (including but not limited to fist-cuffs), our pissy protags answer a knock at the door and the angsty drama suddenly morphs into a violent home invasion flick.

Writer/director Charles Dorfman seems per-



Barbarians is the first feature as writer/director for Dorfman but his credits as producer include *The King's Speech*, the Soska sisters' *Rabid* remake, and the acclaimed documentary *Tina*, so he's hardly a newbie. He's got chops for days and, while his script eventually takes a few questionable turns, its audacity is infectious. Dorfman does appear to have concentrated his energies on scripting the toxic masculinity of his leads – well-meaning but insecure and impulsive Adam (*Game of Thrones*' Iwan Rheon) and the almost comically narcissistic Lucas (*Knightfall*'s Tom Cullen) – to such a degree that their female counterparts are rather undercooked. Regardless, even if you're as over home invasion thrillers as I am, *Barbarians*' general

fectly at home in both these territories, and while his vision is decidedly cinematic, he has no qualms about letting the first half of his story – almost to the minute – unfold like a play, driven almost entirely by his four leads' constantly colliding ambitions, insecurities, and quirks. In fact, when the masked baddies bust in, we may hope the characters can put their differences aside in classic fashion to fight a common enemy, but we seriously wonder if they won't try to somehow weaponize the situation against each other instead.



deftness and somewhat unusual structure make it an arresting watch.

JOHN W. BOWEN

WEREWOLVES WITHOUT

THE CURSED

Starring Boyd Holbrook, Kelly Reilly and Alistair Petrie
Written and directed by Sean Ellis
Elevation Pictures

Bounding out of the boggy festival feature thicket like the sinewy, hirsute love child of Christophe Gans and Robert Eggers, *The Cursed* (a.k.a. *Eight for Silver*) is a lycanthropic yarn that strides in step with the flourishing folk horror revival.

Opening in the Battle of the Somme as a silver bullet is removed from the body of an injured soldier, the film transports viewers 35 years into the past to discover just how the lump of precious metal found itself buried in his flesh. In late nineteenth-century France, brutal land baron Seamus Laurent (Alistair Petrie) orders the purging of a Roma clan from the countryside surrounding his village. After the people are tortured barbarically (including the erection of a mutilated human "scarecrow" and the burial of a live Romani witch) and their encampment destroyed, a mysterious set of silver fangs and a rash of horrific nightmares fore-

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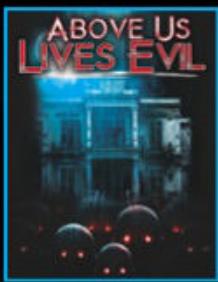
CINEMACABRE 33 ROM



OVERLOOKED, FORGOTTEN AND DISMISSED

THIS ISSUE: LANCE COMES HOME

NEIGHBOUR OF THE BEAST



ABOVE US LIVES EVIL

Sector 5 Films

Your house is supposed to be your sanctuary – the place where the monsters can't get you. But what happens when the place you call home is also occupied by nefarious creatures thirsting for your blood? That's the premise of this outing, in which a dysfunctional family is forced to move into a dilapidated fixer-upper whose previous inhabitants disappeared overnight. Though *Above Us Lives Evil* proves to be a meandering mess, it evicts the suck for crowd-pleasing kills in the end. Unfortunately, the premise can only be taken seriously by the most credulous segments of the paranormal TV-viewing populace. If there's one thing I've learned from watching horror, it's that if you hear scary noises in the attic, it's time to find a new joint. Bonus points if you remember to take the kids!

BODY COUNT: 9

BEST WEAPON: Bottle of perfume

MORE INHUMAN THAN HUMAN



THE BEACH HOUSE

Shudder

Anyone lucky enough to own a beach house knows that leaving the city to spend time by the water is a wondrous experience, even if only for a short while. That's exactly what the young couple in this movie are hoping for, only to discover another couple has beaten them to the seaside shanty. The two couples agree to stay together and munch on some edibles just as a strange blue fog rolls in from the ocean and engulfs their bungalow. And that's when things get all goopy, as the fog transforms them into something not quite human. A talented cast and striking locations make the best of the influences and create something palpably eerie, enough to banish any thought of that seaside skinny dip.

BODY COUNT: 4

BEST WEAPON: Oxygen tank

TAILS, YOU LOSE



BORDELLO DEATH TALES

Chemical Burn Entertainment

Finally, my favourite kind of domicile – the house of ill repute, where money buys ten kinds of love and social diseases are always free! The aptly-titled *Bordello Death Tales* anthology offers a ménage à trois of shorts featuring a trio of jerked-around johns: a serial killer who preys on prostitutes, a raconteur in search of the perfect travelling companion, and a politician with a seriously twisted webcam girl addiction. The unapologetically low-budget British offering is loads of fun to watch, especially when the anal lube and fanny smasher make their appearances. The movie also breaks out into a music video at about the halfway mark. Filled with goofy gore, some decent animation, and a generous heaping of blood, it might not convince you to blow your savings at the local cathouse, but it might make you wish you had.

BODY COUNT: 11

BEST WEAPON: Power drill

tell doom for the baron, his wife (Kelly Reilly), and children. When Laurent's son goes missing, pathologist John McBride (Boyd Holbrook) turns up to investigate the danger and, he hopes, face off against the monster who claimed the lives of his own family years before.

Sean Ellis' lycanthropic chiller is a handsomely mounted period production, full to bursting with rural gothic atmosphere and supernatural menace. There's a preponderance of CGI that keeps the creatures feeling somehow removed from this world of black mud and unending mist, but Ellis freshens things up with some inspired reinventions (a gory autopsy scene is as much Cronenberg as it is Hammer) that infuse fresh blood into the hoary old myth. He doesn't fully commit to the core socio-historical issues at play in this tale of white interlopers getting their just desserts for their brutality, but *The Cursed* has an effective emotional undercurrent that, while it may not leave you howling, elevates it beyond your standard werewolf fare.

ROCCO T. THOMPSON

THE INTERNET: A CAUTIONARY TALE

DARK WEB: DESCENT INTO HELL

Starring Lucas Sarquiz, Jimena Frontera and Clara Kovacic

Directed by Diego Savignano

Written by Diego Savignano and Nicolás Onetti

Black Mandala

The dark side of the internet has long been a draw for those seeking the unusual or outré, and Diego Savignano's Argentinian film *Dark Web: Descent into Hell* further explores those curiosities. Though he works primarily as an assistant director, this is Savignano's sophomore feature after directing *El nacimiento del mal* in 2015.

The film follows an online content creator named Daniel (Lucas Sarquiz), who goes by the handle "Lucovido122," and lives alone with only his axolotl to keep him company. His latest group of videos looks to explore the six layers of the deep web, the dark side of the internet. After a couple of awkward set-up shots that any TikTokker will relate to, the majority of the film plays out like a YouTube video, with Lucovido explaining what can be found in each layer of the deep web directly to the viewer and exchanging ideas over Skype with his internet pal, Electra (Jimena Frontera).



The budding subgenre of social media/found footage gets away with a lot in terms of amateur production quality, but what makes *Dark Web* sometimes feel like a student film is the lacklustre performance of its lead; Lucovido's monologues are consistently flat, even when he's watching an actual snuff film. Granted, the script doesn't give Sarquiz much to work with, but it's hard to get on board with such an unenthusiastic host when the majority of the runtime consists of his exposition.

LAST CHANCE LANCE



We're All Going to the World's Fair

Genre fans will instantly recognize the graveyard opening from Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, as well as the famous razor-blade scene from *Un Chien Andalou*. Paola Tolosa's art direction and Mariana Lupo's set dec are standouts, and Lucovido's streaming set-up looks great, but if you're looking for something to punish you for exploring the internet's dark crannies, my advice would be to stick with the *Unfriended* sequel, or just peruse YouTube yourself.

RJ NADON

A HAUNTING SITE

WE'RE ALL GOING TO THE WORLD'S FAIR

Starring Anna Cobb, Michael J. Rogers

and Holly Anne Frink

Written and directed by Jane Schoenbrun

Utopia

The abstract, dreamlike style that writer/director/editor Jane Schoenbrun brings to *We're All Going to the World's Fair* suggests the sort of film David Lynch might have made if he were just getting started now, in the internet age. The discomfiting feeling that pervades *World's Fair*, however, is underpinned with a genuine sense of empathy and understanding.

The opening credits inform us that young star Anna Cobb is making "her feature film debut" here, and there's a guilelessness to her performance that draws us right into the story of Casey, a teenager whose life is lived on the internet. With no apparent friends, and alienated from her father, she's a horror fan who thinks it might be fun to live in a scary movie, and thus takes "The World's Fair Challenge," which involves a strange, unseen online video, blood from a pricked finger, and repeating a mantra three times. While surfing posts by others apparently altered by this game, she begins behaving

in sometimes disturbing ways, and is contacted by a man (TV genre regular Michael J. Rogers) who calls himself "JLB" and seems concerned for her. But is Casey really transforming, or just acting out? And is JLB a friend, or a manipulative predator?

Juxtaposing long takes (held effortlessly by Cobb) and snatches of both body horror and surrealism, Schoenbrun makes these questions just a part of the fascination of *World's Fair*. They capture the intoxicating power of the internet, particularly for a teen like Casey who lives in a world of empty suburban parking lots. Attracted to the allure of the dark side while still enough of a kid to have a favourite stuffed animal, she's one of the more original young heroines seen on screen recently, in a movie that straddles the horror and coming-of-age genres in a manner suggesting the latter will inevitably contain elements of the former.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

AN UNHAPPY ACCIDENT

DITCHED

Starring Marika Silk, Mackenzie Gray and

J. Lindsay Robertson

Written and directed by Christopher Donaldson

Epic Pictures

It may have been unfair of me to go into *Ditched* with low expectations based solely on writer/director Christopher Donaldson being one of three screenwriters on *BloodRayne 2: Deliverance* (2.7 on the IMDB, y'all!). Fortunately, that prejudice proved wise as this bloodsoaked revenge tale quickly spins out (pun intended) into mediocrity

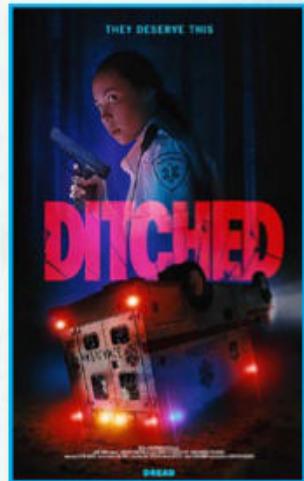
after a relatively stylish start.

Marika Silk (TV's *Twilight Zone* reboot) stars as Melina, a paramedic whose ambulance ends up overturned in a forest ditch during a medical prison transfer. Her team and the cops escorting

them soon start getting picked off one by one by mysterious cloaked figures with a hidden agenda. It turns out that none of them – cops, criminals, and paramedics – are there by chance. Instead, they have been meticulously orchestrated into this scenario in an epic bid for vigilante justice that seems wrongheaded given Melina's self-proclaimed innocence. After all, she just wants to get back to her daughter, as she keeps saying again and again for no suspicious reason whatsoever...

This Edmonton-shot feature starts off with promise, as a concussed Melina wakes up post-crash and is almost manipulated by strapped-down rapist/murderer Franson (Kris Loranger) into letting him go. Loranger pitches Franson as a sort of Borscht Belt Hannibal Lecter and is the most interesting character in a mostly otherwise mediocre ensemble. Mackenzie Gray (*Rabid*) also attempts to up the film's menace as the orchestrator of the evening's carnage but is saddled with enough explanatory dialogue to topple Anthony Hopkins.

Indeed, whatever goodwill the opening scores is wasted by gore whose impact is blunted by our having little investment in the characters being killed and an overreliance on jump scares telegraphed by musical stings. While I was



SHORT CUTS



BITE-SIZED FRIGHTS
FOR SMALL APPETITES

ON THE SLAB: BLACK-AND-WHITE BITES

THE ORIGINAL

11:43 mins/YouTube via the DUST channel

Michelle Garza Cervera's short film may be in black and white, but the choices her protagonists must make are shades of heartbreakingly grey. Alana and Gwendolyn (Ariana Lebrón Baez and Rebecca Layoo) are a vibrant young couple we meet just as they learn Gwendolyn is terminally ill. Cut to what seems like a lifetime later where Alana and Gwendolyn look haggard and exhausted, but an experimental procedure seems to be the answer to their prayers. Although all seems to have gone according to plan, an unexpected side effect from the procedure forces Alana to make an impossible decision. Both Lebrón Baez and Layoo are exceptional in conveying the physical and emotional toll of their ordeal with minimal dialogue, and you'll find yourself wondering what you would do in Alana's situation long after the credits roll.

THE HOWLING WIND

15:41 mins/YouTube via the ALTER channel

Lorian Gish and Justin Knoepfel really know how to set a mood in their short about a small rural town in the midst of a catastrophe where mysterious storms make those who get caught in them erratic and violent. When a stranger named Jacob (Nicky Boulos) turns up unexpectedly in Arnold's (Anthony Arkin) cellar, it soon becomes clear that he's not being entirely honest about how he wound up there. As their distrust builds, there's an interesting clash between the small, claustrophobic setting within the house and the grander, large-scale ramifications of what the storms are doing outside. The story and aesthetic evoke the Cold War-era paranoia of the mid-20th century in a way that will saturate you with dread.

SELF-ASSEMBLY

11:57 mins/YouTube via the ALTER channel

It feels wrong to say that a film that opens with a kid getting hit by a car has an oddball sense of humour, but that's absolutely what Ray Sullivan's short has (along with one hell of a mean streak). When grieving parents (Darryl Kinsella and Amy Kirwan) happen upon an ad for a home assembly cabinet, they're surprised to find that the finished product manifests a malformed, goopy creature begging to be nurtured. Seeing a vessel for their displaced parental instincts, the couple decides to care for the off-putting creature and the expected chaos ensues. The use of black and white, along with some '50s-era aesthetics, creates a sense of cognitive dissonance in a setting that also features laptops and flat-screen televisions. The result is a short that will likely leave you wondering what the hell just happened, but that doesn't need to be a bad thing.

BRYAN CHRISTOPHER

tempted to *ditch* this film partway through (sorry), let's just say that director Donaldson's vehicle remains stuck in neutral (double sorry).

SEAN PLUMMER

THE HUNGER SHAMES

A BANQUET

Starring Sienna Guillory, Jessica Alexander

and Ruby Stokes

Directed by Ruth Paxton

Written by Justin Bull

IFC Midnight

Betsey (Jessica Alexander) is ready to graduate high school but is unsure of what she wants to do with her life. During a party, she wanders into the woods under a blood-red full moon and emerges with some kind of purpose. She stops eating, but weeks later she hasn't lost any weight. She lapses into dormant states and stops breathing for minutes at a time. Doctors suggest that Betsey receive treatment at a mental hospital, but her mother Holly (Sienna Guillory, *Resident Evil: Apocalypse*) refuses. Having failed to save her terminally ill husband from suicide years earlier, she is determined to rescue her daughter herself. But is her love helping or harming?

A Banquet is a slow-burning, horror-tinged drama that fits nicely alongside *Relic*, *Saint Maud*, and other recent women-directed films that explore themes of generational trauma, mental and physical illness, and mother-daughter relationships. The performances are compelling, in particular Lindsay Duncan in a scene-stealing turn as Betsey's grandmother who's really had enough of her nonsense ("We've all got problems, darling. Don't be the show."). David Liddell's cinematography is striking, simultaneously rendering all the food that Betsey won't eat both tantalizing and nauseating.



The film hints at all manner of possibilities to explain Betsey's new "chosen one" condition. Possession, body horror, doomsday proclamations, religious delusion, and even monsters from Japanese folklore are laid out as story threads, but none of them lead anywhere in the end. It's a shame that this scattershot approach renders the film ultimately unsatisfying, because its elements are intriguing. Ruth Paxton gives the viewer a banquet table overflowing with ideas, themes, and subgenres, but a single, focused dish would have been much more filling.

STACIE PONDER

CHEWING THE GREENERY

HERE BEFORE

Starring Andrea Riseborough, Jonjo O'Neill and Niamh Dornan

Written and directed by Stacey Gregg

Saban Films

If you're a horror movie fan of a certain age, *Here Before* might remind you of the 1977 *Audrey Rose* –

INDIE HORROR WUNDERKIND MICKEY KEATING SETS HIS SIXTH FEATURE,
OFFSEASON, AMONG FLORIDA'S EERIEST ENVIRONMENTS

SHADOWS AND FOG IN THE SUNSHINE STATE

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD

WHEN ONE THINKS ABOUT TRIPS TO FLORIDA, BUSTLING BEACHES, HAPPY TOURISTS, AND MICKEY MOUSE GENERALLY COME TO MIND. Independent horror auteur Mickey Keating set his latest movie in a scarier side of the Sunshine State – with a distinct lack of sunshine. *Offseason* sees Marie (Jocelin Donahue from *The House of the Devil*) and her boyfriend George (indie stalwart Joe Swanberg) arriving on an island off the Florida coast in the middle of pouring rain, and just in time before the place becomes closed to visitors. Marie is anxious to check on her mother's grave, which has apparently been vandalized, but there are far worse sights and situations awaiting her as she makes her way through this desolate environment, where the few locals she finds don't seem eager to help her.

Throughout its running time, *Offseason* (in select theatres and on VOD/digital platforms March 11 from RLJE Films and Shudder) plays to one's creepiest expectations of how a seaside town might look and feel once the tourists have left. Keating makes such effective use of locales in and around New Smyrna Beach (known as the shark bite capital of the world, though that particular threat doesn't figure into the plot), it's no surprise that the film was inspired by personal experience.

"The project's origins really go back to my growing up in Florida," he says, "and getting dragged to these tiny beach towns when we had a day off during the winter or whatever. Being on these desolate, empty beaches, and seeing little ghostly figures of people in the distance, has stayed with me for a long time."

Once past his teen years, Keating didn't take long creating scary tableaux of his own. His first feature, *Ritual*, was released when he was just 23, and he turned out *Pod*, *Darling*, *Carnage Park* and *Psychopaths* in rapid succession before he turned 27. After a four-year break, he shot *Offseason* just before the pandemic came down, drawing from literary sources as well.

"Two that definitely jump out as inspirations are William Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily' and Shirley Jackson's 'The Summer People,'" he says. "Both were stories I read and was like, 'Oh my God, these are so inspiring, I want to know more!' The movie kind of formulated around the feelings those stories drew out of me."

Coming home again to shoot *Offseason* was "an absolute blast" for Keating, though he admits to some difficulties in attempting to secure the crucial cemetery.

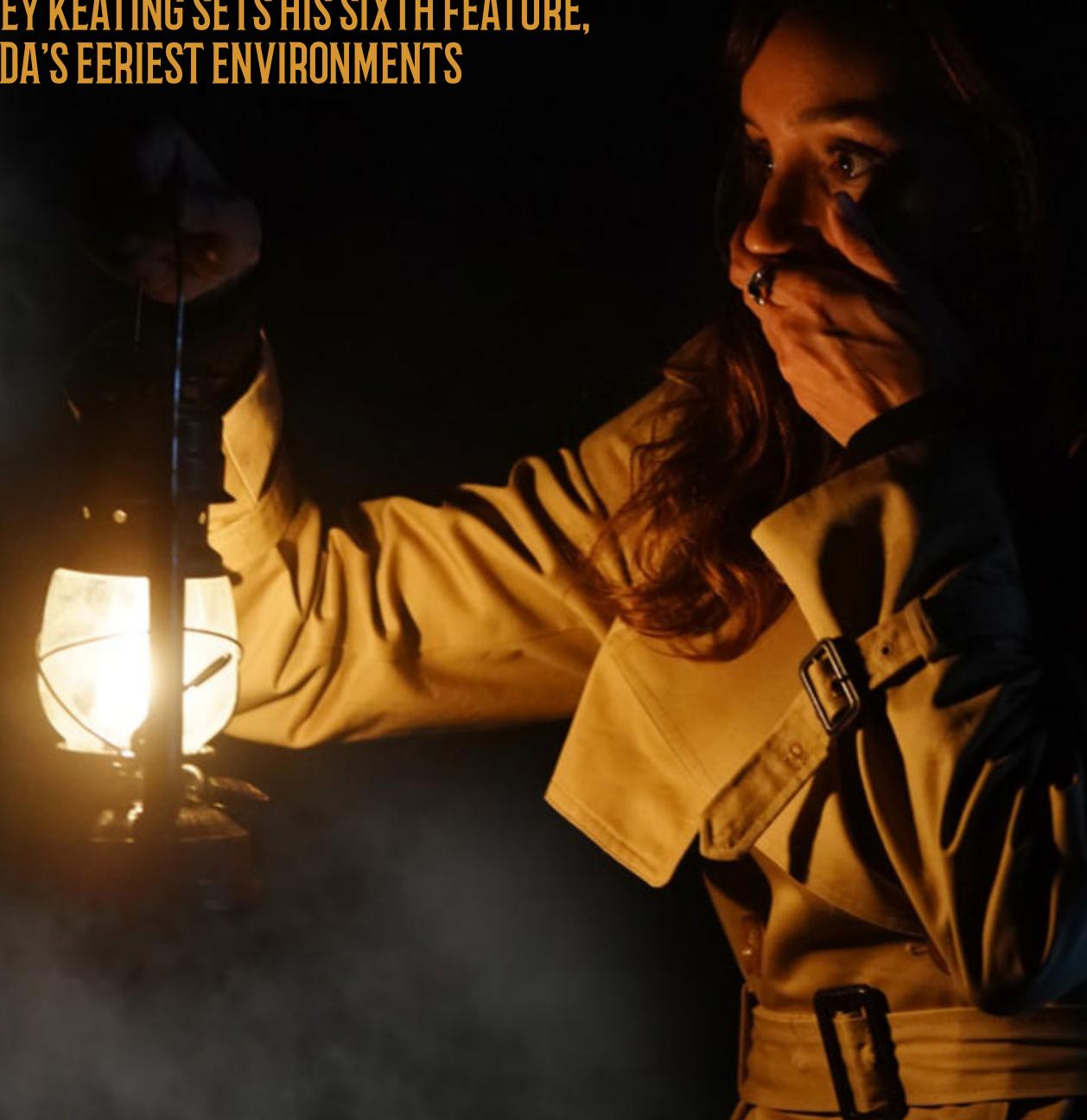
"That was the single most difficult location for us to pin down," he recalls. "We tried to get three different cemeteries; at one of them, the graves were all destroyed and the city couldn't figure out who owned the property. We were like, 'What do you mean, you don't know who owns it?' The one we used, we secured it just before we shot there, but it turned out to be way better than the cemetery where the graves were smashed and the grass was full of burrs and fire ants. So we lucked out!"

This isn't to say that they avoided the local insect population completely, as Keating notes: "There were days when the bugs were literally in curtains. Like the scene where Jocelin is walking toward the big stone structure; all I remember of that whole day is being eaten alive by mosquitoes. There were a lot of things we didn't quite anticipate, but by and large, I can't complain about being able to shoot on locations like that. What you see is really what you get; almost all of it is in-camera, except for certain visual effects things."

He reveals, for instance, that no CGI was employed to create the ominous fog that blankets the film. He cautions, "Never, ever, ever say you want practical fog. There were a lot of scenes, especially in the cemetery, where the ocean was on the other side of the bushes. So we would get it all perfect and wonderfully foggy, and then an ocean breeze would just wipe it all away. But it was worth it; the look of the real fog is something that is unmatched, and you can't do it in a computer."

With all that mist and the skills of cinematographer Mac Fiskin, Keating turned everything from a bar called The Sand Trap to an open drawbridge (whose keeper is played by Rob Zombie regular Richard Brake) into sites out of a nightmare. Suffice it to say, the filmmaker isn't going to be hired by Florida's tourism board anytime soon, and he has a plea for those watching his vision of the state in a cinema seat or their living room couch:

"I'm begging people, please: watch it in the dark, and as loud as you can!"





All the Moons

both movies are about a little girl who may be someone else's reincarnated daughter.

Where Robert Wise's 1977 adaptation of Frank De Felitta's novel was overtly supernatural, *Here Before* (written and directed by Stacey Gregg) plays it all a little more down to earth. Set in perpetually misty Northern Island, the movie follows protagonist Laura (Andrea Riseborough: *Black Mirror*, *Mandy*), a suburban housewife with a devoted husband (Jonjo O'Neill), a teenage son, and a tragic loss: her young daughter Josie died years ago in a car accident. When a new family moves in next door, Laura is immediately taken by little Meghan (Niamh Dornan), who seems to know far too much about Laura and Josie.

Here Before is a wee bit of a cross-genre film, striving to be a supernatural thriller, a straight mystery, and a meditation on grief all at once. The pace can be slow going, especially to anyone expecting an out-and-out chiller. Gregg spends a lot of time on the Irish landscape, letting gardens full of broken toys and rainy hillsides convey atmosphere; the shots are undeniably lovely, but the editing lingers on them at length. The film works best when it focuses on Laura, who is all too ready to believe that her daughter has returned. Riseborough is superb, and her rapport with young Dornan as Meghan is both poignant and eerie.

Overall, the film could have used a few less shots of rain-covered greenery and more emphasis on its characters and the unsettling situation. Its attempted blending of genres diminishes them all rather than creating something compelling. Although its earnestness is admirable, it ends up feeling a little too removed and chilly to be truly involving.

LISA MORTON

NUEVA SANGRE

ALL THE MOONS

Starring Haizea Carneros, Josean Bengoetxea and Itziar Ituño
Directed by Igor Legarreta
Written by Igor Legarreta and Jon Sagalá
Shudder

Not since *Let the Right One In* has there been a dramatic take on the vampire genre as deeply felt and as moving as Spanish filmmaker Igor Legarreta's second feature. Yet while it similarly centres on a young female bloodsucker, *All the Moons* takes on a far greater scope than *Right One*, even as its focus remains intensely personal.

The movie opens in 1876 during Spain's Third Carlist War, in which an unnamed girl (Haizea Carneros) is badly wounded in an orphanage bombing. A mysterious woman (Itziar Ituño) heals her wounds and then introduces the girl to her new

existence, one in which she now thirsts for blood and needs to avoid the sun, but allows her to see many more full moons – a poetic way of telling her she's fated to live forever. After being separated from her initial guardian, she comes into the care of farmer Candido (Josean Bengoetxea), who names her Amaia and introduces her to a normal life, as she struggles with and attempts to transcend the unearthly existence that has been imposed upon her.

All the coding is there, but Legarreta and co-writer Jon Sagalá eschew the v-word, coming up with original and oftentimes captivating variations on the theme. In particular, there's a beautiful sequence in which the girl overcomes one of vampires' traditional weaknesses. In her very first film appearance, Carneros is entralling, conveying a stirring array of emotions even as she has no dialogue for long stretches of screen time. The movie similarly encompasses a wide range of themes – love and loneliness, devotion and intolerance, life and death themselves – that are given their full due, with sufficient dark material to keep horror fans' attentions. So gorgeously crafted that it's a shame the film couldn't get wider big-screen play following its festival tour, *All the Moons* joins *Hellbender* as one of Shudder's must-watch early-2022 titles.

MICHAEL GINGOLD



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REISSUED & REANIMATED

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD



ALLIGATOR BREAKS OUT ON 4K/BLU-RAY

The flood of late-'70s/early-'80s nature-run-amok movies that swam in the wake of *Jaws* carried few films that could truly be considered classics, but Lewis Teague's *Alligator* (1980) is one of them. Despite uncharacteristic raves from mainstream critics at the time, it wasn't a big hit for indie distributor Group 1, but huge ratings for *Alligator*'s ABC broadcast premiere in March 1982 helped the film toward the appreciative following it maintains today.

"It is kind of hard to make a convincing movie about a giant alligator loose in the sewer," says Shout! Factory's Cliff MacMillan with a laugh, "and [scripter] John Sayles did it, just like he wrote a good piranha movie [1978's *Piranha*]. He's a terrific writer, and he creates people you really care about. Robert Forster's character is so well-written; he's not just a cop, he's got the whole running gag about his hair, and the fact that he wants to have a dog. That's what has kept *Alligator* alive — and the fact that it's been unavailable for so long."

Alligator did receive DVD release from Lionsgate in 2007, but after that disc went out of print a while back, fans hoped for a Blu-ray edition worthy of the movie. That finally happened with Shout!'s just-released three-disc Scream Factory Collector's Edition, showcasing a new 4K transfer of the film on both UHD and Blu-ray, with a second Blu-ray containing the extended

TV version. For good measure, Shout! also gave the 1991 direct-to-video sequel *Alligator II: The Mutation* its own Blu-ray debut.

"We tried to license these movies from a German company called Atlas that had the rights, and couldn't work it out," MacMillan says. "[Group 1's] Brandon Chase had given them to Atlas to do licensing so that he didn't have to deal with that. Then Atlas went bankrupt, and the rights were with Brandon for a long, long time, and one of our acquisition team just hung in there and kept trying to close the deal. It took literally four years, I believe, maybe even longer, to finally work it out."

Once the rights had been nailed down, securing the necessary materials was much easier, given that — surprise, surprise — everything was in storage. Shout! was able to snag the original camera negative for both *Alligators*, as well as *The Sword and the Sorcerer*, the Group 1/Albert Pyun hit also coming in a new edition this year.

"*Alligator* is probably one of the best transfers we've done," gushes MacMillan. "It looks amaz-

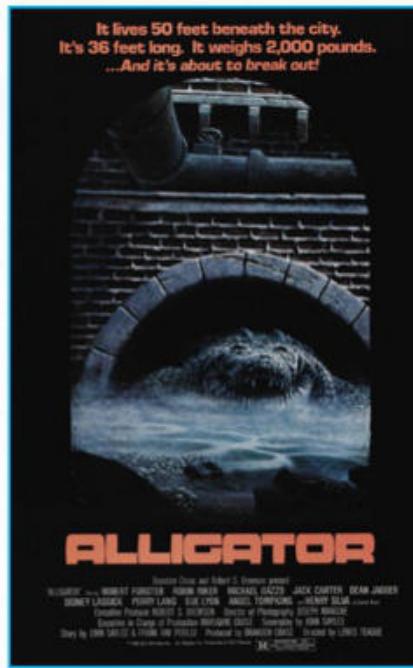
ing; it looks like it was shot yesterday. *Alligator II* was the original negative we've done the least work on, out of every title we've ever handled, because it was so clean," he adds. "The negative just hadn't been touched in so many years; I don't think it had ever been used since the first time. That movie was really made for television, because the first *Alligator* was such a huge hit for ABC."

Speaking of which, Shout! was able to include additional scenes from the TV version of *Alligator* — used to fill out the two-hour time slot — incorporated into the movie and as a separate extra feature; turns out, they were also in storage.

"That footage was only available as an interpositive, so we transferred that, scanned it in 4K and then inserted it into the new 4K transfer of the theatrical version," says MacMillan.

When it came to *Alligator*'s supplemental package, extras were harder to find with many folks involved in the

film no longer with us, including the great character actors Michael V. Gazzo, Sydney Lassick, Dean Jagger and Jack Carter, as well as star Forster. Shout! was able to license Lionsgate's



commentary by Teague and Forster and interview with Sayles, and a list of bonus features from Reverend Entertainment's Justin Beahm. These include fresh onscreen chats with Teague, Sayles, female lead Robin Riker, and effects creator Robert Short. The big coup, according to MacMillan, was that Michael Felsher was able to get ahold of actor Bryan Cranston, who was a production assistant on *Alligator*.

"I love *Alligator*," says Felsher, head of Red Shirt Pictures, who also put together the Sayles featurette during his company's early days, and created a remastered version for the Blu-ray. "When Robert Forster passed away a few years ago, a lot of people were talking about their memories of working with him. One of them was Bryan Cranston, because Forster had a very memorable guest shot on the next-to-last episode of *Breaking Bad*. And Cranston mentioned that he had met him years before, 'when I was a lowly production assistant on this movie called *Alligator*, and it was really cool to meet up with him in a different context years later.' I saw that and was like, 'I had no idea,' because Cranston's not billed in the credits. A couple of years later, Shout! Factory picked it up, and I explained this idea I had about Bryan Cranston. I think we were both kind of like, 'Sure, why not? That'll happen!'"

And it did happen, though only at the last minute. Once Felsher found the right publicist to hook him up with Cranston, the actor was in London making a movie. He wound up travelling back to LA just in time for Felsher to set up an interview with his long-time collaborator, cinematographer Jim Kunz, with Felsher linked in via an iPad.

"I don't normally like to do interviews remotely, but this was Bryan Cranston!" he says. "I wasn't sure how much he'd have to say, since he was just a production assistant and this was 40 years ago. But I asked my first question about *Alligator*, and aside from a couple of interjections from myself to clarify a few things, I got well over twenty incredible minutes from him. It was one of those interviews that was so good I was on a high for the rest of the week."

Another fun bit of *Alligator*'s history on the disc is a TV commercial for the hard-to-find *Alligator* game, modelled by the Ideal Toy Company on its



much more popular *Jaws* game.

Beyond *Sword*, Shout! acquired more Group 1 titles including 1976's *Mansion of the Doomed*, the very first fright film produced by Charles Band ("We licensed that to Charlie, because he really wants to put that out"), and 1977's *Meatcleaver Massacre*. That occult-revenge flick, with nary a meat cleaver in sight, is notorious for being interspersed with Christopher Lee footage from an unrelated project – though no one has yet determined for sure what that project was.

"What was interesting when we found the film elements was, all the Christopher Lee stuff was missing," MacMillan says. "It took some work to track down that material; I believe it was an internegative we used for that footage, but we did

find it all and its audio. We're probably going to present it on the disc so you can watch the movie either way, with Christopher Lee or without him."

And he wants to put to bed (so to speak) the rumours that Shout! is working on a deluxe *Nightmare on Elm Street* boxed set, in the vein of their previous *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* packages.

"That's just people running around, making speculations," he says. "I've seen pictures of artwork that people have created, but no, [New Line parent company] Warner Bros. won't give us the rights. Freddy is still an active franchise to them, so they won't let it go. We want it desperately; I've begged and pleaded, and it's just always a no."

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IT CAME FROM BOWEN'S BASEMENT



DRIVE-INS, DELETE BINS AND OTHER SINS

Jeez Louise

by John W. Bowen

If you see only one Louise Lasser slasher movie this year in which she makes out with a guy at a drive-in while her twin sons sleep in the back of the station wagon, sits on her kitchen floor dejectedly eating Thanksgiving leftovers while having an existential crisis, engages a telephone operator in a long, really weird and highly personal conversation, yells "I'm Todd" over and over again while bodies pile up like the last act of Hamlet, and does a quite a few other equally weird things with spectacularly bad hair, well, you should probably see 1987's *Blood Rage* (a.k.a. *Slasher*, a.k.a. *Nightmare at Shadow Woods*), because even if she does all those things in another film, it's unlikely that other film will be quite as entertainingly bad as this one.

And if you think that was a run-on sentence, bear in mind that I only have one page, which is woefully inadequate to describe this cheap-ass three-ring clusterfuck of excrementally inept delights. We begin in flashback with single mom Maddy (Lasser) on the aforementioned drive-in date/snogfest with her kids in tow. (I was raised by a single mom who never, to the best of my recollection, did this.) While she's (cough) distracted, one of the kids wakes up, sneaks out of the car, swipes a hatchet from another vehicle, and hacks some guy to death. The psycho kid then frames his twin brother for the murder.

Years pass and the story proper begins one Thanksgiving while Todd (Mark Soper), the innocent-but-understandably-maladjusted falsely accused brother, continues to rot in an asylum while his secretly evil twin Terry (also Soper), a preening, skeevy narcissist, has been curbing his murderous tendencies all these years, waiting for his brother to escape and take the blame for more murders. Which is exactly what happens now. In fact, that's pretty much all that happens for the rest of the movie and yet, dammit, so much more. But hey, like I said, space limitations, right?

It may seem a cop-out to compare this film too closely to another recently featured here in the Basement, but I'm hard pressed to think of two other films I've reviewed in recent years that would make a more perfectly imperfect double bill than



Blood Rage and *Butcher, Baker, Nightmare Maker* (RM#201), because *BBNM* boasts the same howl-inducing combo of over-the-top violence and a what-in-the-actual-fuck script with a barking mad mother figure at its centre.

However, *Blood Rage* kinda walks away with dubious top (bottom?) honours for a script that veers between groan-prone clichés and head-explosion-inducing non-sequiturs, worse performances from its younger cast members, way more gore (albeit by way of much goofier-looking effects), and Ted Raimi as a drive-in bathroom condom salesman. Most importantly, while *BBNM* was propelled by Susan Tyrrell's insatiable scenery-munching, Lasser binge-and-purges that shit from the fixtures to the foundations in *Blood Rage*. In fact, I found it helpful to turn on the English subtitles for most of the runtime, since Lasser mumbles her bizarre dialogue almost inaudibly when she's not having screeching freakouts.

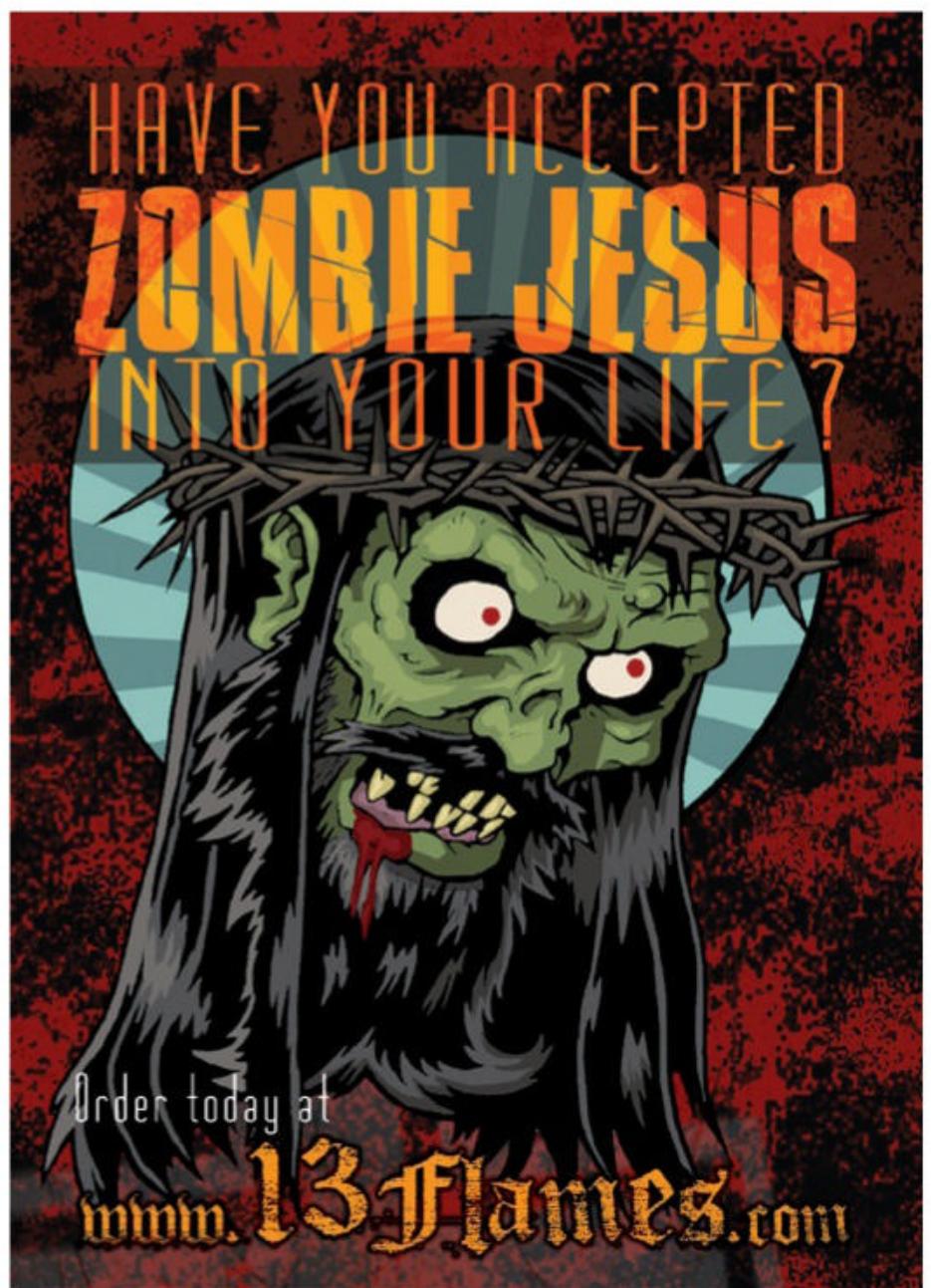
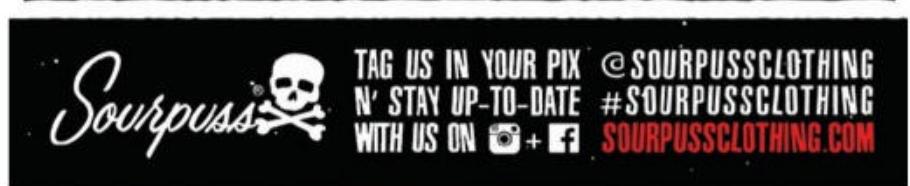
Speaking thereof, I seem to recall concluding my review of *BBNM* with a brief look at the odd bio of Susan Tyrrell; I'd be remiss if I didn't do the same now with the even odder life and career trajectory of

Lasser. After years of supporting roles and bit parts in film and TV, Lasser, in her late 30s, landed the title role in Norman Lear's bizarre soap opera satire *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, one of the most unconventional hits of the late 1970s. She and the

show became cult sensations virtually overnight, but substance abuse and bad behaviour soon made her a tabloid punchline and sent her career into the shitter. Among her dubious subsequent achievements, she became one of the earliest *Saturday Night Live* hosts to be blacklisted from returning (a club that would eventually include Milton Berle, Frank Zappa and Steven Seagal). Soon she was back to secondary roles and cameos, albeit frequently in acclaimed fare (most notably in Todd Solondz' brilliant 1998 tragicomedy *Happiness*). Oh, and in the midst of it all, she was briefly married to Woody Allen, which back then didn't carry



quite the same stigma it does these days. In fact, it was oddly prestigious, but still, y'know... ew. Now get the hell out of my basement and go procure me some prophylactics from ol' Ted. Texas-size, of course, and ribbed for her pleasure.



FILES FROM THE BLACK MUSEUM

THE LONG SHADOWS OF CLASSIC HORROR'S PAST

BY PAUL CORUPE

Rattling Cages

"THOUGH NO CLASSIC HORROR FILM COULD HAVE PREDICTED OUR MODERN LOVE/HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIAL MEDIA, THE WAYS THAT MANY OF US ARE ENSNARED IN SELF-MADE PRISONS ARE CLOSELY EXAMINED IN THE OFTEN SHOCKING 1964 CLASSIC *LADY IN A CAGE*."

Even on the best of days, tending to our social media feeds can feel like an unpleasant obligation. Forget about living your #bestlife or spreading #goodvibesonly, it's hard enough to escape the gossipmongers, conspiracy cranks, and obsessive fandoms that clutter our timelines with hostility and disingenuous takes. And yet we still keep scrolling through this cycle of reaction and rage, afraid we'll miss that one piece of news everyone's going to be talking about. Though no classic horror film could have predicted our modern love/hate relationship with social media, the ways that many of us are ensnared in self-made prisons are closely examined in the often shocking 1964 classic *Lady in a Cage*. This early home invasion film, which recently received the Blu-ray treatment from Shout! Factory, looks at how hard it is to escape these cages even as they negatively affect how we see and interact with others.

In the film, aging widow Mrs. Hilyard (Olivia de Havilland) lives in a lavish L.A. manor with her adult son (William Swan), complete with a fancy elevator to get her to the second floor. But one weekend, with her son away, an oblivious handyman accidentally cuts her elevator's power during a trip upstairs, leaving Mrs. Hilyard stranded twenty feet in the air. With increasing apprehension, she sets off an external alarm bell to call for help but only manages to draw in curious transient George (Jeff Corey) who's more interested in raiding the wine cellar than a rescue. Later, a trio of juvenile thugs led by Randall (James Caan) pick up the scent and follow the man back to Mrs. Hilyard's home. As the trapped owner uses everything at hand to try to reach her phone or alert her neighbours, Randall quickly takes advantage of this situation and begins to indulge his most sadistic urges.

Similar to Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, other big screen icons who took on scream queen roles in the 1960s, de Havilland excels in this unusual role as the refined matron whose polished politeness covers more dangerous motives. From her perch behind the decorative birdcage-like elevator doors, she appears to live in a world apart from not only the desperate likes of George and Randall, but the rest of the city too – we see many indifferent passersby, oblivious to her pleas for help. When Randall turns violent, Mrs. Hilyard sneeringly calls him "offal produced by the wel-



fare state," and starts to plan her own brutal attack. Stripping away her Grand Dame facade, she's caught off guard when her tormentors find what appears to be her son's suicide note, left behind before his weekend trip. In the letter, he accuses his mother of withholding his share of their money to keep him from leaving the estate's grounds. It's at this point that she finally realizes that her cynical attempts to rise above people like Randall have kept her isolated in ways she didn't expect – from her community at large, as well as the son who sees death

as the only release from her gilded grip.

What's notable about *Lady in a Cage* is its seething undercurrent of aggression, a tension that occasionally leads to outbursts like Mrs. Hilyard hurling down accusations that Randall and the other intruders are little better than animals. Though social media anger can sometimes be righteous, we're all familiar with the way online tempers flare over wildly inconsequential subjects – just recall the fights and petty provocations in the wake of *Halloween Kills*, a film you've probably already forgotten about. With so much hostile bickering out there, it's no wonder that we're never quite able to log off, driven by some vague worry of being left out of the conversation, or falling prey to the unspoken expectation that we must post an instant reaction to every morsel of marketing-orchestrated pop culture news. Increasingly, it feels like our compulsion to constantly refresh our timelines – though rarely rewarding – is just as confining as Mrs. Hilyard's sterile estate.

These problems are even more concerning in light of recent news that Facebook is looking to evolve social media into an interconnected "metaverse." Seeing the way that today's apps tend to rebrand conflict as engagement, it's worth considering whether we're signing ourselves up for even more of the same – to voluntarily reside in a virtual world that connects us to our family, our work, and our peers, but also exposes us to the usual gang of smirking contrarians, grifters, and bad faith provocateurs ready to stoke fears, push out misinformation, and pick fights. If the internet seems beyond any hope of civility now, the coming metaverse will certainly not fix that – instead, we may find we've set up shop in an even more unpleasant and hostile cage, and it'll no longer be us who hold the key. ☠

HORROR CULTURE



HAPPY HILL
Joe Mulvey and
Rich Douek
Comix Tribe

INKED IN BLOOD
Steve Foxe, Andres Esparza
and Phillip Sevy
Z2 Comics

NIGHT OF THE GHOUL
Scott Snyder and
Francesco Francavilla
Best Jackett Press

ARTIE AND THE WOLF MOON
Olivia Stephens
Graphic Universe

THE ALL-NIGHTER
Chip Zdarsky and
Jason Loo
ComiXology Originals

ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER'S THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA
Cavan Scott and José María Bevov
Titan Comics

BLOOD IN FOUR COLOURS

BY PEDRO CABEZUELO

Fresh from their bloody book *Wailing Blade*, creators Joe Mulvey and Rich Douek reunite for *Happy Hill*, a tale of the supernatural and humanity's endless quest for contentment.

Happy Hill is an exclusive resort deep in the woods of the idyllic Catskills Mountains, where vacationers gather to forget their troubles. Needless to say, when a child goes missing on the grounds, it risks tarnishing the locale's reputation. Compounding the matter, a young journalist named Wyatt is convinced the area is being stalked by the Wudsman, a mythical figure allegedly responsible for a series of mysterious disappearances over the decades.

Though *Wailing Blade* had its share of blood-spouting, gut baths, at its heart it was more of a medieval, sci-fi epic, a cross between *Mad Max* and *He-Man*. *Happy Hill* is a more straightforward horror tale and key to this is the figure of the Wudsman who channels the power of the dark forest to stalk and brutally murder his prey.

"He's sort of the classic 'mysterious wood-

lands slasher,' like the kind we used to tell stories about on Boy Scout camping trips," says Douek. "When I was on those trips, the stories were about Cropsey, an escaped mental patient who dragged off any kids that set foot in the forest. The Wudsman has motivations and a back story that are a bit more complex, but at its heart he's inspired by those same types of campfire tales – the boogeyman waiting just outside the ring of light that the campfire casts."

Complex is as good a way to describe the Wudsman's look as any; sporting a long coat with fur collar and cuffs, and what appears to be a gas mask with antlers attached, he's unique, bizarre, and striking all at the same time.

Co-writer and artist Mulvey explains its origins: "A few years back, I was in an antique shop and saw an old, framed photo of a very creepy-looking family where what I'd guess to be the father was wearing an old style gas mask, fur coat and top hat. It just started this whole story going in my head. What it's developed into is even worse, but the overall intent is to scare people and hopefully make them wonder who or what is under the mask."

Aside from killing people with his bare hands (or convenient forest vegetation), the Wudsman also has a weird habit of asking people if they're happy right before moving in for the kill. Which brings us back to our titular, picturesque resort, which was founded by a World War II survivor who was determined to help others find happiness. It's a theme that plays heavily as the story progresses: be careful what you wish for.

"So much of modern life is centred around achieving happiness – all the products we consume, the whole self-help industry, it's all like,



Happy Hill: The mysterious Wudsman slashes through a wellness retreat deep in the Catskill Mountains.

'buy this, and you'll be happy,'" says Douek. "And what it all really comes down to is, how important is happiness to you? If you really think owning a fancy car will make you happy, and you need to do some unscrupulous things to get it, is that worth it? What happens if you sign the papers, get behind the wheel, and find out you're still miserable? I think a big part of what we're talking about with *Happy Hill* is how the pursuit of happiness can often lead us down a terrible road, and whether there's a way back from that or not."

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QUICK CUTS

The lead singer of Ice Nine Kills (*RM#197*), Spencer Charnas, has been arrested and charged with the brutal murder of his fiancé. Super-fan Heather refuses to believe it's true and pledges her undying support for him. When Heather connects with fellow fans, they decide to break into the local high school to hold a vigil in support of Charnas. However, the vocalist's arrest has spurred a rash of copycat killings, as Heather and her friends are about to witness firsthand. Tying in with INK's 2018 album *The Silver Scream, Inked In Blood* can be enjoyed in its own right as a breezy and fun slasher romp. Like most good slasher films, it knows what horror fans want – quick and creative kills – and on that score it delivers, as teens are disposed of in a number of gruesome and imaginative ways. That Heather lacks an iota of characterization doesn't really matter; we know why the other characters are there and they fulfill their purpose admirably.



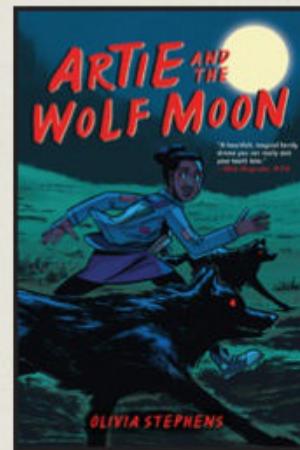
Ardent film buff Forest Innman believes he's hit the motherlode: he's tracked down elusive director T.F. Merrit at a remote hospice in order to get the full scoop on Merrit's lost movie, *Night of the Ghoul*, believed by many to be the greatest horror film ever made. With only scraps

remaining in existence, Innman is determined to find out the truth behind the movie's supposed destruction in a fire and Merrit's subsequent disappearance. On his deathbed, the director fills in the blanks, though the truth may be more horrifying than what was put on celluloid. While Scott Snyder crafts a dense narrative

that switches back and forth between Innman's interview and patches of the classic film, Francesco Francavilla brings it all to life in glorious technicolour. He knows how to craft creepy imagery, whether its Merrit's burnt and decaying face, shadowy figures skulking the hospice's hallway or tantalizing glimpses of the eponymous ghoul. An excellent work by two creators at the top of their game.

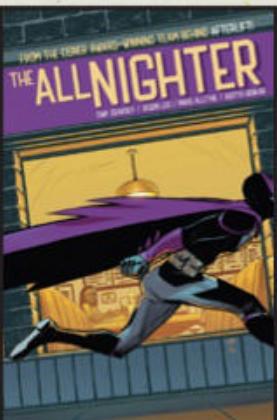
Artie Irvin is a shy, introverted tween girl whose life gets flipped around when she finds out she's half-werewolf, on her mother's side. While Artie comes to grips with her heritage, her mom decides to reconnect with her estranged family to help teach Artie about the wonders of shape-shifting – and the vampire

threat that endangers all werewolves. *Artie and the Wolf Moon* foregoes the traditional "curse of the werewolf" narrative in favour of one that explores the family dynamic in the pack, a very appropriate theme in a work aimed at younger readers. As such, the first portion of the book leans very heavily on Artie reuniting with her extended family, her feelings towards her absent father, and her blossoming romance with fellow werewolf Maya. This has the effect of raising the stakes, both physically and emotionally, when the inevitable confrontation with the antagonistic vampires takes place. It's a heartfelt and worthy read, regardless of your age.



What do you do if you're a bored vampire? You could run an all-night diner on the side, like the quartet in *The All-Nighter* who are trying to live with humanity instead of devouring them. Flipping burgers for eternity can get tedious too though, so Alex, one of the younger vampires,

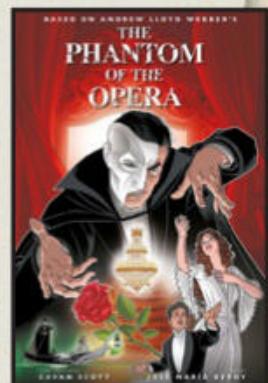
decides to take his love of fictional superheroes a step further by becoming one. This doesn't sit well with his friends, who are worried that Alex's vigilantism will bring down the wrath of The Takers, a mysterious shadow organization who not only have a hold on vampires, but other legendary creatures as well. Mixing horror with super-heroics is nothing new; Marvel has been doing it for decades. But author Chip Zdarsky has a



way of making it feel fresh by wrapping all the characters, including the main foursome, in an air of mystery, slowly doling out information. There's also a fascinating idea at the centre of the story: that creatures such as vampires, trolls, and even Frankenstein's monster live in this world simply because they were believed into existence by people's desire to have them there.

Call me a hopeless romantic but I've always had a soft spot for Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera*. The fact it leans into its

horror roots is definitely part of the appeal, and something that this graphic novel adaptation of the musical doesn't ignore. Fairly faithful to its source, and complete with the lyrics so you can sing along at home, artist José María Beroy takes advantage of the format to punch up the setting with a visual grandeur that's impossible to achieve on stage. Benefiting the most are the grand opera house itself, the subterranean Phantom lair with its dank, labyrinthine tunnels, and the cemetery sequence, in which the Phantom duels with his romantic rival. Though the book excels in playing up the epic elements of the original production, it fails somewhat in portraying much of the emotion that is at the heart of the story. A few close-up panels on the characters during the quiet moments would have lent the tale a greater sense of sympathy and pathos, especially for the Phantom. ☺



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THE

NINTH CIRCLE

BOOKS

WITCHCRAFT

Jessica Hundley and Pam Grossman, eds.
Taschen

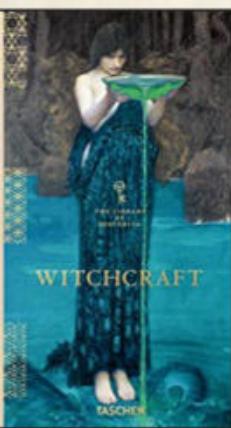
Taschen's new series of lushly illustrated books, *The Library of Esoterica*, explores "the symbolic language of our most potent universal stories, the tales we tell through paint and ink, costume and clay." After the comparatively innocuous subjects of Astrology and Tarot, the company's latest title delves into darker waters, devoted entirely to witchcraft.

Clearly, the texts, images, and overall attitude of the book view witchcraft as a positive, empowering alternative spirituality rather than a satanic malignant evil.

That said, the book's aim is to present "a kaleidoscopic, wide-lensed look at depictions of witches throughout history – both as we've imagined them and as they self-identify." And, since witches have been portrayed primarily in a sinister light throughout most of history, many

of the images are pretty creepy, at least for the uninitiated.

This huge, 520-page compendium of witches' lore, designed by Thunderwing, contains all the known and lesser-known paintings, woodcuts, and etchings of witches and Sabbaths that one might expect, from such masters as Caravaggio, Bruegel, Dürer, Goya, Rubens, William Blake, Fuseli, Gustave Doré, Félicien Rops, Waterhouse, etc. but also esoteric artworks by the magicians Éliphas Lévi and Austin Osman Spare and popular illustrations by Harry Clarke and Frank Frazetta. Captivating art from Japan, Russia, Haiti, Brazil, India, and many other places proves the witch's worldwide appeal, while photos of practicing witches testify that they live and work outside of books and museums. There are also beautiful stills from such cinematic horror classics as *Häxan*, *The Wicker Man*, *Black Sunday*, *The Witches of Eastwick*, *The Craft*, *The Love Witch*, and both *Suspirias*.



The stunning pictorial eye candy is accom-

panied by concise but expert texts dealing with subjects that include A Brief History of Witchcraft in the Western World, Reconciling Witchcraft & Global Folk Traditions, The Witch in Literature, Fairy Tales & Folktales, The Sacred Days of the Wicca, Types of Magick, Visual Magick & Its Makers, The Witch in Pop Culture, etc.

Despite its subject, *Witchcraft* isn't a book intended to frighten, but to enchant and enlighten – and maybe even have you dancing skyclad beneath the pale moon.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIC

GWENDY'S FINAL TASK

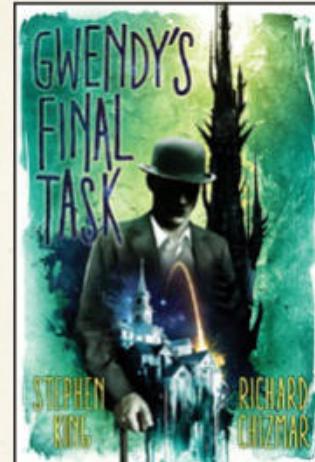
Stephen King and Richard Chizmar
Cemetery Dance Publications

When the mysterious stranger in a black hat gifted twelve-year-old Gwendy Peterson with his button box, the trajectory of her life became forever altered. Dispensing rare gold coins from one end, exquisite chocolates from the other, the omnipotent box held the power to heal, destroy, or make anything its owner desired come true. Once a ridiculed preteen loner, Gwendy reinvents herself as a popular student athlete, graduates with honours, and forges ahead as a best-selling novelist before fast tracking a formidable political career to a seat on the senate.

Powerhouse authors Richard Chizmar and Stephen King combine forces once more to take Gwendy out of this world, quite literally, to complete her final task.

Pulling political strings, she joins a small crew of scientists and a billionaire passenger who are rocketed from Earth towards the MF Space station. Also along for the ride is the button box, stowed away in a classified case only Gwendy knows about. Or so she thinks. Despite the dark forces competing for the box, she intends to keep a promise made to an old stranger by sending it on a one-way trip into deep space in order to save her world and, most

probably, all the worlds beyond. Adding to the palpable tension are Gwendy's struggles to keep the degenerative symptoms of her accelerating dementia at bay before her mission becomes a



best kept secret, even from herself: yet another toll exacted by the box.

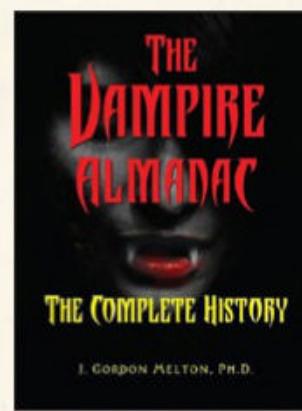
Constant Readers will enjoy revisiting Castle Rock with side trips to Derry and other familiar haunts in this sprawling dark fairy tale. With a finale apt to echo deep within the cosmos of our subconscious, we can only hope *Gwendy's Final Task* doesn't live up to its title by truly being the end of her long, magical journey. Godspeed, Gwendy.

RICK HIPSON

THE VAMPIRE ALMANAC

J. Gordon Melton, Ph.D.
Visible Ink

Just how enormous is the topic of vampires? If J. Gordon Melton's beefy paperback is any indication, it's big enough to fill some 626 small-print pages (and that's not including the 87-page index). Of course, there's much to cover, and this reference book surveys every aspect of bloodsuckers from the creatures' worldwide history to their contemporary adventures in literature, film, and pop culture to those who study them and those who write stories about them.



The Vampire Almanac functions as a follow-up to Melton's now decade-old *The Vampire Book: The Encyclopedia of the Undead*. As he explains in the introduction, which also defines the scope and Western bias of the project, he's altered his approach here and structured this release around a number of questions, beginning with "How did vampires originate?"

This is tackled in the first section, The Vampire Way, a thorough look at the origins, appearance, behaviour, and weaknesses of blood-drinkers. This leads directly into a history of the vampire, and then a section called Studying the Vampire, which examines how the monster has been handled academically through the ages. Here, Melton includes a survey of the pertinent scholars and scholarly organizations involved in this research. Not unexpectedly, there's also an entire section on Dracula, before sections about The Vampire Onstage, The Literary Vampire, Cinematic Vampires, Vampires on TV, and Vampires in Pop Culture.

The book is so painstakingly compiled that you



The Vampire Almanac: Dracula.

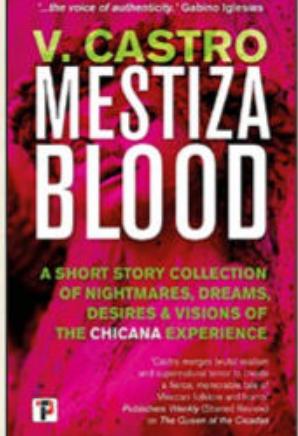
may find yourself looking for properties that Melton overlooked, and while there are admittedly a few, he's done a beyond admirable job here. He's made studying vampires and their role in our ever-evolving pop culture his life's work, and it shows. More than a crash course on one of the genre's most enduring monsters, it's a veritable clinic. Sink your fangs in.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

MESTIZA BLOOD

V. Castro

Flame Tree Press



Wise readers who picked up V. Castro's 2021 novel *The Queen of the Cicadas* likely have an inkling of the sort of tales that comprise the author's latest release, *Mestiza Blood* (also from Flame Tree Press). For everyone else, the cover text – "a short story collection of nightmares, dreams, desires & visions of the Chicana experience" – should catch you up.

Castro is a Mexican-American writer whose culture and its collective experience and folklore drive her fiction, with attention-grabbing and -holding results. This inspiration is evident throughout *Mestiza Blood*, in stories with titles such as "Night of the Living Dead Chola," which explores the beginnings of an appropriately vengeful zombie apocalypse, "Nightmares & ICE" about a woman running from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement only to have to face down La Lechuza from Mexican folklore, "Mal de Ojo," a three-and-a-half pager featuring both the titular ritual and a curse, and "The Latin Queens of Mictlan" about how a mother of three became a queen of the Aztec underworld. La Lechuza, in a slightly different incarnation, makes a second, more murderous appearance in the collection's violent closing story, "The Final Porn Star."

The fourteen tales in *Mestiza Blood* all utilize first-person perspective, making for compelling and accessible narratives that invite the reader directly into the worlds and experiences Castro is shining a light on in her fiction. Undeniably strong currents of social and societal commentary run through these pages, as the author turns the old writing class adage "write what you know" up to eleven, describing the book as being about "all the horror I saw and felt growing up Mexican American." Given that admission, we should consider ourselves both fortunate and blessed that she's chosen to share that experience with us.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

PULSE: BOOK ONE

B.A. Bellec

Self-Published

We're navigating unprecedented times, and while this has undoubtedly been a massive cause of distress for many, it could also be viewed as a source of creative inspiration. This was clearly the case for author B.A. Bellec when it came to penning the dystopian horror novel *Pulse*.

Chock full of social and political subtext, *Pulse* observes the deterioration of the planet by

DANTE'S PICK

THE VALANCOURT BOOK OF WORLD HORROR STORIES, VOLUME 2

James D. Jenkins and Ryan Cagle, eds.

Valancourt

The first volume of Valancourt's *Book of World Horror Stories* earned glowing reviews everywhere from *Publishers Weekly* to right here in *Rue Morgue* (RM#197), and was nominated for the World Fantasy and Shirley Jackson Awards. The second volume has a lot to live up to, and although a hundred pages slimmer, it still contains a wealth of riches: stories from twenty countries on five continents, originally published in sixteen different languages.

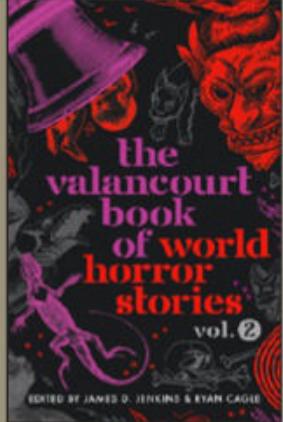
Greed is a universal theme, from Nigeria's "Owolabi Olowolagba" to Bulgaria's "The Recording of the Will" about a notary summoned to a notorious moneylender from whom he receives an unexpected burden. A sellout is behind Brazil's "Screamer," in which a businessman on a trip encounters a corpse haunted by guilt about its misdeeds in life. Greed for power leads to voodoo in Haiti's "Lucky Night," where one has to give total pleasure to a beggar found near a cemetery in order to secure a place in the Senate. Horrific payoff of one's Faustian bargain with rotten Brazilian politics is depicted in the atmospheric "Train of Consequences."

Also prominent are the horrors of war, as in "The Pallid Eidolon" (Israel), about a war orphan attracted to an isolated house, or the Polish story "The War," whose protagonist wonders if there can "be anything worse than alternately falling asleep and waking up, each time being left to one's fate in the same nightmare?"

The highlight of this volume is Iceland's "The Bell," a transgressive tale about a series of unpredictable events on an island cursed by a nameless evil. Runners-up include "The Grain Dryer of Tammöküla" from Estonia, a delightful fable about an evil spirit haunting a farm, and "The Wonders of the Invisible World" (Denmark), about an invisible man intruding in an anorexic writer's apartment only to uncover unexpected sights.

The second volume of *World Horror Stories* offers such a variety of subgenres and approaches (psychological horror, body horror, conte cruel, weird tale, folk horror, unclassifiable weirdness) that even the most demanding readers will be satisfied.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIC



IN *PANDEMONIUM*, ED SIMON TRACES THE HISTORY OF DEMONOLOGY THROUGH MORE THAN TWO MILLENNIA OF DIABOLICAL ARTWORK

THE EVIL IN EVERYTHING

BY MONICA S. KUEBLER

FOR MOST OF US IN THE 21ST CENTURY, DEMONIC FORCES HAVE LARGELY BEEN RELEGATED TO HORROR FILMS AND NOVELS, but for a considerable portion of human history, people believed that demons really existed; creatures that could not only corrupt and defile but, in some cases, be communicated with, summoned, and even controlled. Ed Simon traces our long, ever-evolving relationship with the demonic in his new book *Pandemonium: A Visual History of Demonology* (out now from Cernunnos), utilizing a treasure trove of historical paintings and illustrations to tell the tale.

"I've always naturally been drawn to the occult, the grotesque, the supernatural, and the macabre, though my own degree of 'belief' in those things is agnostic," says Simon. "When it comes to demons and the demonic, I don't necessarily literally believe in them, but that doesn't mean that I don't fear them. What's always been so fascinating to me about demons is that they provide a complicated mythological vocabulary for us to talk about evil."

But just where and when did this all start? Simon explains that while "references to malevolent spirits and entities alongside prescriptions of how to placate them" can be found as far back as the cuneiform writings in Sumer, these were not demons in the Christian sense (though Christian writers would later go on to interpret all pagan gods as demons).

"Scriptural references are actually pretty sparing in the Hebrew canon, there are allusions to entities like Lilith in Isaiah, for example," he notes, "but there's not exactly a full demonology yet. In the first few centuries of the Common Era, both Jews and Christians became interested in demonology as we'd recognize it today, the former being able to draw on the copious examples of Christ exorcizing demoniacs in the gospels. Among Jewish communities there was also an increasing interest in protecting against demons, which is reflected in the Talmud and Kabbalah. The first demonological text that really sets the template of the genre – listing of demonic names, hierarchies, descriptions – wasn't until the eleventh-century with the Orthodox theologian

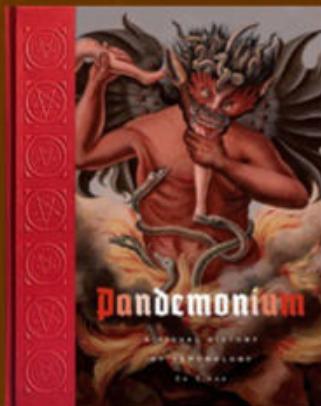
Michael Psellos, so relatively late, all things considered."

Psellos' text and many others are explored in *Pandemonium*'s 402 pages, as are the works of a stunningly wide range of artists and writers, as well as practitioners of the demonic (from John Dee and Éliphas Lévi to more modern occultists such as Aleister Crowley and Anton LaVey). Simon describes the process of narrowing down the full-colour artwork that would appear in the book as fantastically fun.

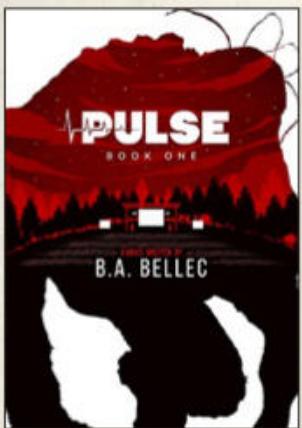
"A big part of what both [my editor] Rodolphe [Lachat] and I wanted from this volume was something that wouldn't just gather images everybody already knew, but where really bizarre pictures could be included that readers might not have seen before. Lots of usual suspects are there, Hieronymus Bosch and so on, but I really wanted an assemblage of largely forgotten or hidden images. ... The cover, for example, comes from an 18th-century German grimoire, the original of which is kept at the Wellcome Library in London."

In the book's introduction, Simon compiles a list he calls "The Principles of Demonic Poetics." The seventh and final entry on that list states that "a history of demonology is by necessity a history of the world." After reading *Pandemonium*, that statement is difficult to dispute.

"About halfway through the project it became clear to me that I was writing a history of the world from antiquity to the current day through the lens of demonology. ... One of the things that I found is that the metaphor and idea of the 'Demon' is so prevalent throughout those various ages, and that as that idea evolves you can trace shifts within the dominant culture as well. For example, demons in antiquity may have been understood as motivating spirits, as kind of Dionysian energies, but thousands of years later during the Enlightenment they can become stand-ins in philosophical arguments. The purpose of the demon alters over time, even though the connotations can remain the same. Tracing those changes in what demons mean are one way to tell a story about how humans change over the centuries."



the year 2040. With Earth largely controlled by the mega-corporation that shares its name with the novel, things unsurprisingly go awry. Fracking leads to the destruction of our ecosystems; food and water become scarce and contaminated; humans become overwhelmingly addicted to social media, breeding narcissism on a massive scale; automation replaces the need for human employment; and the list goes on and on.



These ramifications can be attributed to those in power being horrifically corrupt. Adding insult to injury, their negligence and carelessness leads to the spread of a biological weapon in which a worm-like parasite turns the host into a literal flesh-hungry monster.

Pulse offers an abundance of gory sequences, creating a level of body horror on par with Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan's *The Strain* trilogy. With its story focused on corruption at the hands of mega-corporations, the plot also wouldn't be out of place within the *Resident Evil* franchise. Despite being an entertaining read, *Pulse* is very much a cautionary tale. Much of the meat on these bones has been directly repurposed from the chaos we've all witnessed over the last handful of years, and like the way George Orwell's works caused readers to pause and think, *Pulse* warns us where our lackadaisical attitudes and apathy could potentially lead... and boy, is it ever ugly.

BREANNA WHIPPLE

SUNDIAL

Catriona Ward
Tor Nightfire

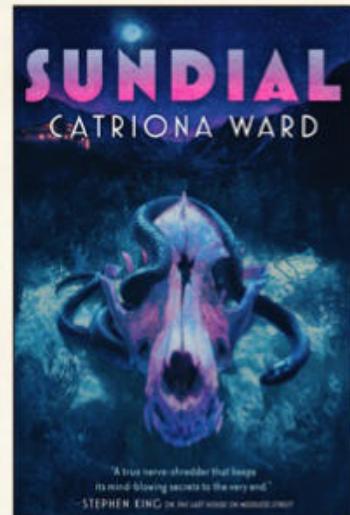
Hot on the heels of last year's *The Last House on Needless Street* comes Catriona Ward's *Sundial* which opens as most domestic psychological thrillers do, with a broken marriage and a dysfunctional family. Ward deftly peels back the layers, dropping subtle clues as to when and where the relationship between Rob and Irving first showed signs of self-destructing. Neither character is sympathetic; Rob comes off as cold and solitary, sipping hot lemon water or sucking on cinnamon candy as "her only indulgence." Meanwhile, Irving is a pretentious philanderer who is prone to violence. Ward uses the story to question the duties of a woman as a wife and mother in situations that are threatening to her mental health or physical safety. Fans of Zoje Stage's *Baby Teeth* will instantly feel at home here.

Following a particularly startling discovery, Rob decides to take their troubled oldest child, Callie, to her childhood home (called Sundial) in the desert. It's here that the novel introduces a story within its story and the psychological thriller transitions into familial Gothic horror. The sudden narrative shift feels like a race car pumping the brakes for a nice, leisurely Sunday drive.

Ward arranges the flashback narrative in such a way that pertinent information is metered out at an intentional, almost frustratingly slow pace, requiring readers to settle into a tone and atmosphere that's completely different from the short, dual, present-day POV chapters in book's first half.

There is a lot going on in *Sundial*: domestic violence, sibling rivalry, nature vs. nurture, animal experimentation, and so on. The plot carries with it heavy, intricately plotted puzzle pieces and then dumps the entire box out in the middle of the book, asking readers to hang in there while it's painstakingly put together. Mildly satisfying but too burdensome, *Sundial* doesn't rise above a middling read.

SADIE HARTMANN



LIBRARY OF THE DAMNED

ANNE RICE AND ME

As a kid, I discovered mass-market horror novels through supermarket spinners, which led me to seek them out in public libraries and on the bookshelves of others. As such, my introduction to popular horror fiction followed a similar trajectory to other readers of my vintage: Stephen King, then Dean Koontz, James Herbert, Clive Barker, insert the names of a few more white men here. It says a lot about the publishing landscape of the era.

Of course, by this point, Anne Rice (1941-2021) had already released the first three installments of *The Vampire Chronicles*, the first *Ramses* book, two stand-alone novels, and several more under pseudonyms, but it would still be a couple years before I'd encounter her work. When I did, early in high school, I read those vampire books in under a week. Instantly, I had a favourite monster and a whole new appreciation for monster stories, because in Rice's fiction they weren't just something to be feared, fought, and repelled, she took us right into their world and made us live (and love) with them, giving us a monster's eye view, if you will. It was nothing short of thrilling, and for the young writer I was at the time, it opened a veritable Pandora's box of ideas that I continue to mine to this day.

The revelation of a woman writing massively popular genre stories was not lost on me either. Discovering Rice marked the first time that I thought, 'hey, maybe I can write scary stories too,' though I was still years out from seriously trying. No, what happened next was that Rice opened the door, inspiring me to seek out other women in horror, whose work I spent the next few years devouring.

All the while, Rice herself continued to loom large. She remained a must-buy author for me throughout the '90s, before her return to Catholicism sent us in different directions. Still, there's no doubt her fiction left its mark. King and co. may have been my gateway drugs, but only Rice made me consider writing monster stories myself. I mean, how could the genre have a glass ceiling if she could sell the paperback rights to *Interview* for \$300,000 more than King got for *Carrie*?

One of the greatest privileges afforded by my long tenure at *Rue Morgue* (twenty years this coming winter – gasp!) is that I've been able to meet and/or interview most of my literary heroes. Rice was one of the few I never crossed paths with. If it doesn't sound too strange, maybe it's better that way; she gets to keep her pedestal and remain a larger-than-life figure in my mind's eye. I can think of few popular authors more deserving. R.I.P.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

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THIS MONTH:
THE WITCHY CRAFT OF SLUTFOCATE

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NAME

Slutfocate

HOMETOWN

"I'm from Indonesia and I'm currently located in Bali."

WEAPON OF CHOICE

"All of my works are digital, and my method is photo collage or what I like to call 'image stitching.' For example, I take a body posture from one image, and from there I start to 'stitch' all of the other limbs from other images so they create a character that I have envisioned in my head. Same method is done for the background and surroundings."

DEEDS

"What I'm most proud of in my career so far, is that I can work for no one but myself, and that I can manage to produce so many physical crafts of my digital artworks as prints, shirts, bundle boxes, etc."

MY NIGHTMARE FUEL

"My inspiration comes from so many things, including daily life but mostly it comes from movies, local urban legends, mythology, etc. Sometimes it comes from my own scrambled thoughts, and definitely from other artists too."

LAST WORDS

"I got quite the hate lately due to [the fact that] so much of my artwork contains nudity, basically telling me that whores should be punished or sacrificed."

RESTING PLACE

Find [@Slutfocate](#) on Instagram and Twitter, and her shop at [morbidstudio.bigcartel.com](#).

FOLLOW PAIGE ON INSTAGRAM
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A DUMPSTER DIVE INTO HORROR'S ODDS & CURIOS

DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

BY
STACIE
PONDER

SINCE HORROR'S EARLIEST DAYS, creators have mined real-life events and biographies for inspiration. Sometimes there's a "based on a true story" tagline slapped on a movie to add a little zest of "this could happen to you!" spookiness. Oftentimes, however, "based on a true story" actually means "haha, we made it all up," as is the case with the cinematic adventures of con artists – uh, *paranormal investigators* Ed and Lorraine Warren. And then, in a category all its own, we have the 2006 film *Stay Alive*, in which a group of gamers find themselves battling the ghost of Elizabeth Báthory in a video game and in real life. Yes, this movie is as perfect as it sounds.

This is not the first time, nor will it be the last time, I am sure, that Báthory's life has inspired a horror movie. After all, as legend tells it, she killed hundreds of young women and bathed in their blood in an effort to maintain her youthful looks. (Ah, the unfair beauty standards for women, am I right?) Or maybe she killed them all simply because she wanted to! Maybe they were jerks. Most likely, she never killed anyone at all and the gruesome tales were lies spread by political rivals. But no matter: the point is, she actually existed. We can read her biography. We know for a fact she was a countess who died in the early 17th century, imprisoned within her Hungarian home.

In *Stay Alive*, a gamer named October (side note: all the gamers in the movie have cool names that real people totally have, like "October" and "Swink") informs us that yes, "This Elizabeth Báthory chick was sick and twisted – and very real." However, history and horror movie diverge from there, and we learn that *Stay Alive*'s Báthory lived in Louisiana and spent her time running down young women in her

horse-drawn carriage. Eventually she was walled up in a massive stone tower... on her swampy plantation.

As I said, *Stay Alive* is perfect, perhaps because it is so very, very stupid. One cannot help but admire the way it commits to and basks in its own stupid, ahistorical premise! It would be more than enough for me if *Stay Alive* just featured Elizabeth Báthory as a video game antagonist, but there's more, dear reader. There is also the detail that fills up my brain tub to overflowing (you know, like blood!): when we finally find out who is behind the deadly video game, it seems to be... Elizabeth Báthory herself.

Whilst solving the mystery, our intrepid gamers visit the publisher behind the game, which is headquartered at Báthory's plantation. There's plenty of supplemental game development materials there, but no people whatsoever, unless you count Báthory's living corpsey-ghosty thing. There is absolutely no indication at all that anyone besides the Blood Countess worked on this video game. Having vowed revenge as she was locked in her tower, Elizabeth finally got it at long last. And I do mean long: she had to wait hundreds of years for video games to be invented, then had

to take some kind of correspondence course to learn how to make them. Then, she single-handedly designed an online multiplayer game that could also somehow kill people in real life. She then developed a relationship with Sony Entertainment and got her game published on the Playstation 2. Ultimately, Elizabeth Báthory goes on to become the greatest indie game developer of all time!

Countess, serial killer, pioneering video game designer, horse-drawn carriage enthusiast, murderous ghost: we should all hope to have as rich a life story as the one horror movies bestowed upon her. ☠



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AUDIO DRONE



H.P. LOVECRAFT / ANDREW LEMAN / FABIO FRIZZI

The Festival

CADABRA RECORDS

It's still Christmastime as this issue of *Rue Morgue* is being put together, which is why you're reading a review for H.P. Lovecraft's *The Festival* on vinyl – arguably the darkest Yuletide tale ever written, one that begins with the innocence of freshly fallen snow and ends in predictably damp, monstrous madness (and a copy of the *Necronomicon*). Narrator Andrew Leman lends the story's nameless protagonist sufficient emotional depth, optimistic and hopeful at the start before becoming ambivalent and ultimately anguished, which ties in nicely with the score by Italian horror maestro Fabio Frizzi. Here, the composer offers one of his most beautifully powerful yet subtle scores, pulling out all the stops including synth, piano, strings, and eventually a full orchestra, starting out in the Christmas spirit before growing oh-so-dark, until all of the instruments combine into something downright terrifying. This 2021 reissue is a double-LP that includes the isolated score, and is a must-have for horror soundtrack aficionados.

💀💀💀 AVL



AUTHOR & PUNISHER

Krüller

RELAPSE RECORDS

No one's going to mistake Krüller for Thriller, but Author & Punisher mastermind Tristan Shone's decision to

ELECTRONIC

switch off some of the aggro on album number nine could boost his cultural signal even further than his 2018 *Beastland* single "Nihil Strength" did. Don't get us wrong: Krüller is a punishing listen that showcases Shone's mastery over electronic tonalities and battle-ready beats, but his bespoke blending of industrial and metal (performed on machines he designs himself) is tempered with mournful vocals reminiscent of The Deftones' Chino Moreno. Album opener "Drone Carrying Dread" is representative of the new(ish) sound: an apocalyptic cry of despair with an epic scale that makes it a stadium rock anthem for an impossible audience of hipsters and riveteheads. Shone's fatally downtempo cover of Portishead's "Glory Box" will rightfully spark interest, but the depth of his rage is best demonstrated on the titular closing track, which sounds like Pink Floyd processed through a bad DMT trip.

💀💀💀 SP



NEPHTHYSIS

Spiral Hollow

DARK IRIS MUSIC

Dark times spawn dark art, and Nepthysis' *Spiral Hollow* offers proof that these times are dark indeed. Bound to cause endless arguments about proper pronunciation, the band's namesake – and musical delivery – is a tribute to twin goddesses Nephthys and Isis from Egyptian mythology. A musician for film and television by trade, multi-disciplinary artist Sheila Eden's creations are naturally visual. Starting with the cautiously restrained "Remnants of You," the angst reaches a full boil in standout track "Sovereign Cry," before bubbling over into the industrial dance number "Lies Beneath." Playing with rock and industrial instrumentation, breathy whispers, howls, and soaring sopra-

nos, *Spiral Hollow* rests somewhere between Portishead's haunting minimalism and Chelsea Wolfe's witchy charm. Perfect for those looking for an elder goth version of Evanescence.

💀💀💀 JB



OBSIDIAN

Vultures

(INDEPENDENT)

"Love in a cemetery is a grave affair," states the gatefold insert on this 10-inch EP from South Florida's Obsidian: a good indication of the devoted '80s goth rock contained within. Obsidian's influences are like a who's-who of Batcave club bands: The Cure, Christian Death, Sisters of Mercy, etc., and although there's an obvious newbie-element to this EP (the band is trying a little too hard to replicate a past era with more limited musicianship), there's something captivating about the mountainous basslines on "Viracocha," the slithering guitar on "Anachronous Life," and the deli-

cious synth of "Night Director." Even if you've heard this all before – and perhaps, better – there is something about revisiting music for the children of the night produced with the sounds of modern day. 💀💀💀½ AVL



THE BIRTHDAY MASSACRE

Fascination

METROPOLIS RECORDS

The candy-coated melancholia that The Birthday Massacre has perfected over the course of its career has shifted on *Fascination*. Instead of a longing for lost youth, the Toronto-based sextet's ninth album focuses lyrically on the inevitability of death, with equal measures of fear and acceptance. What remains the same is TBM's trademark sound, and fans of their unique meld of epic electronics, haunted melodies, and goth rock embellishments will find much to savor. The title track opens the album with glittering keyboards and

GOTH

LADY IN WHITE

Frank LaLoggia

SCARE FLAIR RECORDS

For the 1988 cult flick *Lady in White*, Frank LaLoggia poses a unique triple-threat as writer, director and composer, and his complete score has finally been pressed on ghost white vinyl. LaLoggia's melodies mesh well with actor Lukas Haas' child protagonist, and while the music plays to the horror beats when necessary, the emphasis is on a nostalgic sweet-nostalgia and sense of adventure. The score is at its best when it employs a wordless children's choir that adds to the timeless flavor of the music, ultimately pitched somewhere between Dave Grusin's sprightly themes from *The Goonies* and Danny Elfman's ethereal *Edward Scissorhands*. If this initial release from Scare Flair is any indication, the new label is an act worth watching – the two LP set is effectively presented in four suites, with evocative art from Brad Mrock. 💀💀💀½ JS

SOUNDTRACK



PODCASTS FROM BEYOND



PARKDALE HAUNT

THEME: The occult

FREQUENCY: Seasonal

Inspired by the true horror that is the big city real estate market, *Parkdale Haunt*'s chilling stories address the question: what if you were dealing with an actual reno from Hell? Written,

produced, and performed by Emily Kellogg and Alex Nursall, the podcast follows the exploits of lifelong friends Claire and Judith over the course of two seasons (so far). When Claire inherits a home in Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood from her unknown biological family, she and Judith decide to document the renovation process as a fun podcast. But it doesn't take long before things go awry, both with the home (e.g., drains overflowing with centipedes), and with Claire. Did she just become a Goop-ified lifestyle influencer seemingly overnight, or is something more nefarious at play; something to do with the occult dealings that previously occurred on the property? Thanks to brilliant writing and natural performances, this pod escapes the over-acting pitfalls that plague many an audio drama. Presented in found-footage style, listeners experience some of the story in real-time as Claire and Judith record, but much of the creepiness is derived from the disturbing artifacts that appear on tape during playback. Sound designer Ian Boddy superbly combines practical foley effects, subtle audio nuances, and innovative scares to make this one of the most immersive horror productions out there. Put this one at the top of your to-listen list, it doesn't get much better. ☠️☠️☠️

JESSICA BUCK



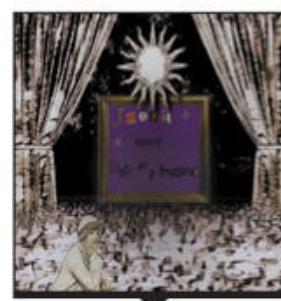
FIRESIDE CANADA

THEME: Storytelling and analysis

FREQUENCY: Bi-weekly

Most of us have heard a few good local legends in our day, but how often do we really look into their origins, or credibility? Luckily, the *Fireside Canada* podcast is here to do the heavy lifting, exploring and analyzing the legends, lies, and lore of Canadian culture. Every episode concerns a particular – and usually lesser-known – ghost story, creature sighting, or “real” occurrence like The Crucified Canadian of WWI, the Hag of Newfoundland, the Demon of Sainte-Émeline, the Phantom Train of Medicine Hat, or the Curious Creature of Yale, British Columbia. Host/producer David Williams starts each installment with a creative retelling of the tale at hand, engaging the listener and demonstrating why it was salacious enough to enter into the public consciousness. Once the fantastical part is over, Williams gets down to the business of deconstruction; questioning timelines and witness statements, while also exploring the legend's historical and cultural significance. Presented in news magazine style, Williams' delivery is professional and straightforward with only light background music and the occasional SFX. While the content can be thrilling, this podcast takes a more serious approach than some of its contemporaries, and is geared towards those who seek an experience that is more educational than entertaining. If you're the type that gets irritated with hosts that chatter on about their own lives for the first half of the show, this one is for you. ☠️☠️½ JESSICA BUCK

singer Chibi declaring that she's “falling in love with fear.” Should the goth clubs reopen in 2022 (winklepickers crossed), expect “Dreams of You” and “Cold Lights” to join TBM staples like “Red Stars” and “Looking Glass” on DJ playlists. To say The Birthday Massacre has matured on this record would be cliché but accurate, and I expect to keep feeling *Fascination* for some time to come. ☠️☠️☠️ SP



JESTR

ROCK

The Dead and Riches

(INDEPENDENT)

JESTR will go down as one of the least spooky-sounding bands claiming to be influenced by the paranormal and bizarre, but don't sleep on debut album *The Dead and Riches* – at least not if you dig high octane rock 'n' roll from the '90s and a whole lot of fun. “Ghost of You” is essentially pop punk-era Sum 41, while “Hades” and “Spellbound” sound like the Weezer songs that would come on at the end of your university club night as you prepare to head home alone again... but amped up to eleven. Still, while a marketing agency might describe *The Dead and Riches* as dynamic, one might also call it unfocused, with too many songwriting shifts to give it a solid sense of identity. Regardless, JESTR makes the '90s sound a lot more rad than they really were, even if feelings of dread are lost on the listener. ☠️☠️ AVL



EARTHLESS

METAL

Night Parade of One Hundred Demons

NUCLEAR BLAST RECORDS

Alumni of the rock/alternative scenes unite in San Diego-based Earthless. A three-song full-length album generally denotes either serious doom or relentless prog, and this release defi-

nately leans towards the latter while keeping a foot firmly in the former. Named for a Japanese folklore tradition of an annual incursion of Yōkai or “strange apparitions” into the mortal world, a full two-thirds of the hour-long *Night Parade of One Hundred Demons* is dedicated to this specific phenomenon. Without knowing enough about Japanese music to call it an influence, the songs certainly do have a sense of otherworldly mystery that's only elevated by the lack of vocals. Finale “Death to the Red Sun” dives into full-on metal, closing things out in a torrent of grooving riffs and solos. Overall, *Night Parade of One Hundred Demons* is epic, intriguing, and well worth your time, not to mention the gorgeous cover art. ☠️☠️☠️ GT



ILIUM

METAL

Quantum Evolution Event

(INDEPENDENT)

Playing trad or power metal is, in many ways, like making a good horror flick: if you really want to pull it off, you need to do things so well that your audience checks its sense of disbelief at the door. With its latest EP, Ilium comes close but doesn't quite nail it, demonstrating a knack for tight, crunchy riffing, effortless solos, and genuinely rousing choruses but lacking the ability to knit it all together. The spectres of Helloween, Iron Maiden, and Judas Priest soar overhead as the band labours lovingly at its craft, telling tales of hostile aliens and humanity's inevitable demise. For all the flamboyant gusto, though, the storytelling tends to yank you out of the experience. I mean, you can't fault folk for wanting to talk about how cool insects are, but wailing “like the moth! I am a creature of the night!” is more likely to set eyebrows wagging than induce brain-killing bangovers. ☠️☠️½ AD





A SCORE FOR A SAWYER

BY THE TIME YOU'RE READING THIS, THE NEW NETFLIX *TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE* DIRECT SEQUEL IS LIKELY ALREADY A MEMORY. Yes, the Tobe Hooper original is one of my all-time faves, a film I've come to appreciate as an incomparable piece of horror art. You know the drill: the searing Texas heat, the smell of burning flesh and – as your resident horror musicophile – I can't help but mention TCM's harrowing soundtrack, a screeching, clanging cacophony that captures a sense of utter madness like no other piece of film music before or since.

Like John Carpenter, Hooper took on scoring duties himself for *Texas Chainsaw*, enlisting sound expert Wayne Bell to help concoct nightmarish sounds that still reverberate to this day. It's really an exercise in sound design over score, or music vs. sound, if you will, with little of what is heard being particularly listenable. It's not like the two sat down and wrote this thing out on sheet music, instead creating an entire library of sounds, using pretty much everything at their disposal: standup bass, steel guitar, percussion, not to mention children's instruments, and a bunch of scrap metal to bang on. In this depiction of total insanity, warped sounds are featured prominently, both with real instruments and random objects. Other instruments were intentionally used incorrectly, including a dulcimer that was literally stretched to insanity.

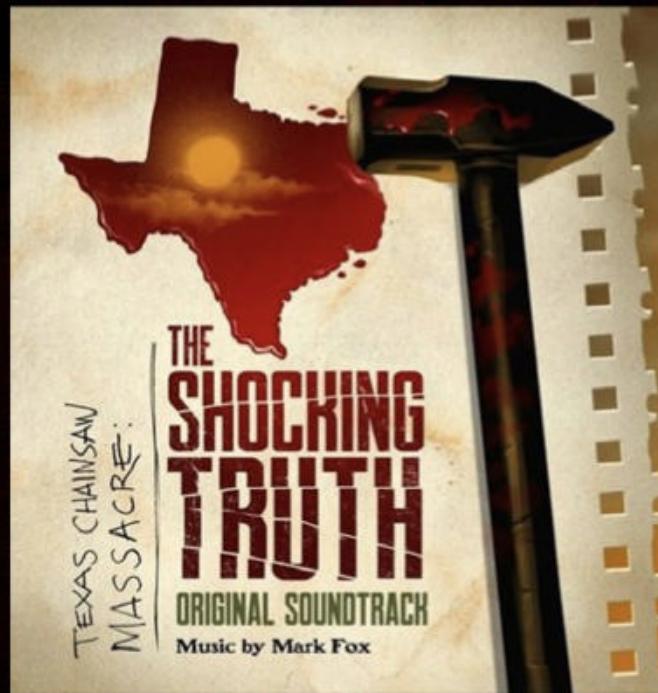
That unhinged, chaotic sound design looms large in a couple of key scenes, including Leatherface's first appearance, as the hulking freak barrels out of his room, pummels Kirk with a meat hammer, then slams the

door with horrifying finality: the shocking stings and reverbs warn the audience of the true terror to come. Those dark echoes continue to ring as Pam falls into a room furnished with human bones and other macabre decor. But if there is one tone that every horror fan recognizes, it's that unmistakable and iconic flash, the source of which has been a matter of much debate for decades. While some say it was created by rubbing two piano wires together, others insist it was an exotic instrument, but the common consensus is that it was actually created by running a pitchfork down a table. Bell, however, won't tell either way.

So why is there no 180-gram vinyl release of this magnum opus? With a deadline looming, Hooper had to cut the music very quickly, leading to imperfections and a lo-fi quality that only increased the movie's broken charm. So, with no actual master tapes created, there are none to use for an official soundtrack release. Bell, or someone else, would have to recreate the whole thing using the original source recordings.

Which leads us to new soundtrack label Scare Flair Records, who will soon be reissuing composer Mark Fox's score to the documentary *Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Shocking Truth* on vinyl, CD, and cassette, featuring additional tracks not on the original pressing from

defunct label Pure Destructive Records. For now, this is the closest we will get to *Texas Chainsaw*'s ominous sounds on any physical release. Unless of course, someone wants to tackle a recreation of their own. Hey, there is a new movie out...



ADI GEL THE GEL

ADI GEL THE GEL



NOW PLAYING > TO VR OR NOT TO VR BY EVAN MILLAR

By now you're likely aware of virtual reality headsets: once the stuff of sci-fi movies, they've peaked in the consumer market for their tantalizing offer of a changed reality under the past few years of intermittent lockdowns. For myself, I had pretty much sworn them off, having tried a handful of titles on a borrowed PlayStation VR kit with varied results. Games that involved less player-driven navigation like *Tetris Effect*, *Rez Infinite* and *Thumper* were a neat upgrade from the 2-D, flatscreen versions I was accustomed to, but the turning point for trying out the PSVR was the mighty return of a classic horror title, namely *Resident Evil*, and I discovered some novel horrors within.

Now, for some context: I'm aware of *RE4*'s status as arguably the best game in the series and a landmark achievement in third-person action games, but it's always been my least favourite. Its plot is utterly ridiculous, even for a *RE* game, and its enemy design is mostly laughable. Giant ogres? A horror stand-in for Napoleon? Zombie military? The only thing I recall favourably about the entire game was its Rasputin-like villain Chief Mendez who comes apart at the waist to become a fucked-up two-piece centipede of sorts. That was neat. But it wasn't a title I ever thought I'd return to, much less in my thirties and through the eyes of a space-age headset.

Fast forward to 2017, and the gaming world is all abuzz with *Resident Evil 7* on PlayStation VR. My few friends lucky enough to already own a headset attested to a transformative and terrifyingly immersive experience. I was skeptical, but I had to try it for myself. Alas, within mere minutes of navigating the dimly lit and decrepit Baker family mansion, I was completely sick to my stomach – and not in the good way. Apart from the game's mutant fungal insects and humanoids, *RE7* presented me with a terror I hadn't expected: motion sickness. Although not entirely uncommon for a VR-noob, my friends assured me that with some ginger tea or some tweaks to the game's settings, the queasiness would subside. But it didn't. Around an hour in, I was physically unable to continue, forced to lay in bed with eyes shut until I felt the room stop spinning.

So when Capcom decided to remake *Resident Evil 4* optimized for VR last fall, I was faced with an impasse: between being traumatized by my



Resident Evil 4



Resident Evil 7

first virtual tour in the franchise's halls and my middling memories of that title in particular, my expectations weren't what I'd call high. To my surprise and delight, I found what had been promised to me by the expert sources I had spoken to when I wrote about the consumer-grade VR resurgence back in college: a truly immersive, fascinating experience that made me feel present in the game's world. Sure, *RE4VR* still looks like the Nintendo GameCube original from a graphical standpoint; the Oculus Quest 2 isn't quite capable of pumping out state-of-the-art visual fidelity like its more expensive contemporaries, but that really doesn't matter. The vaguely Spain-like setting of *RE4* came alive before my eyes, and simply peering out from a cobwebbed second-storey window at the blood-thirsty villagers waiting to tear me apart made it feel real in ways impossible when viewed on my TV or monitor. Better still, after playing through the entire opening portion of the game, I wasn't covered in vomit!

I guess my point here is that VR as a technolo-

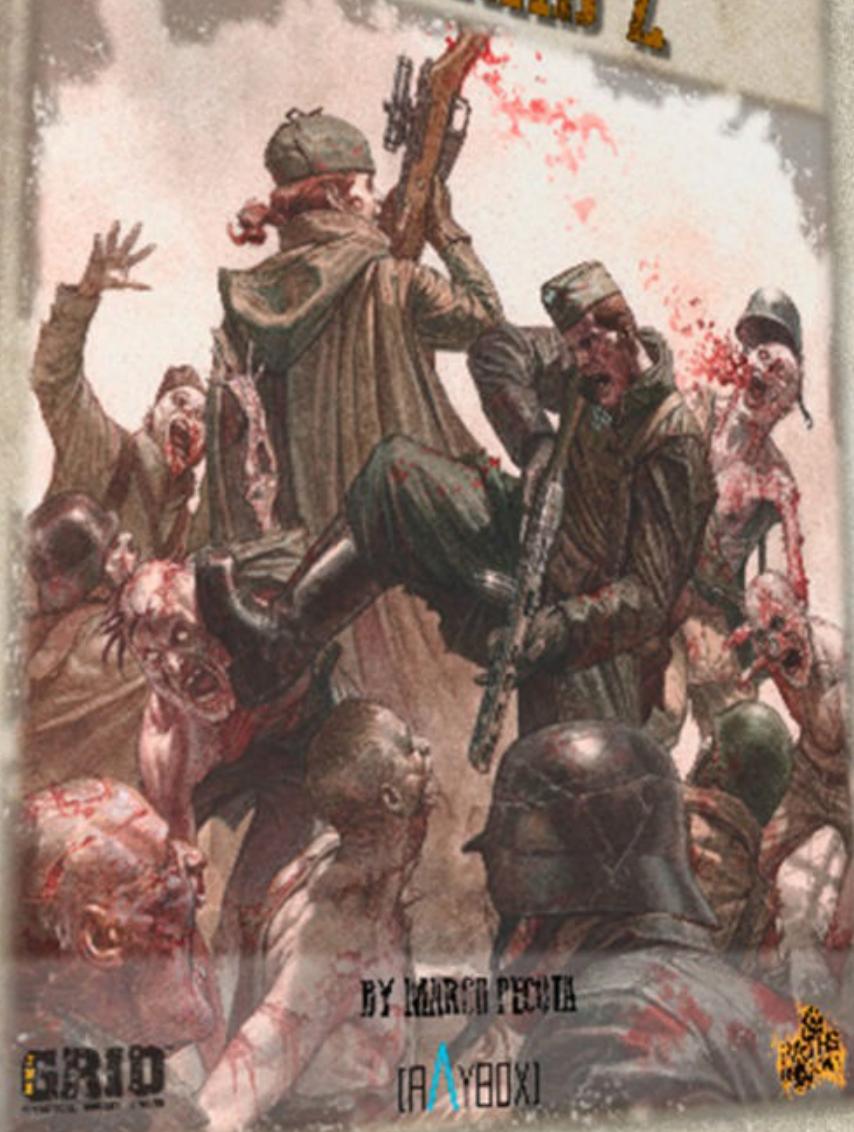
gy still has a ways to go before it truly becomes the revolutionary tool that so many early adoptees claim it to be. While the nausea-inducing aspect of the tech has been improved upon, there's still its undeniably expensive point of entry that I imagine will keep most folks away until they're certain it's the right method of play for them. These days, there are ways around that pesky motion sickness problem I fell victim to. Developers implement a teleportation method of movement that players can toggle, and horizontal rotation can be limited to snappy turns of the camera. Subtle changes, but they made a huge difference to players like me.

Still, VR made me fall in love with *Resident Evil 4*, a game I never thought I'd glance at again. I can't help but wonder what else it is capable of transforming, and for *Resident Evil* to already be on opposing ends of this testing ground only elevates the series' significance in the world of horror gaming. So give it a shot, if you get the chance, but maybe keep a barf bag ready – and not a virtual one.

GRIM HISTORY AS SEEN THROUGH THE CRACKED LENS OF THE SUPERNATURAL

ESCAPE FROM
STALINGRAD Z

ESCAPE FROM STALINGRAD Z



GRID

Escape from Stalingrad Z is a tactical RPG tabletop game set in the horrific zombie plague of World War Two.

The year is 1942 and the city is Stalingrad. Your survivors are veteran soldiers fighting to stave off the zombie hordes in a war-torn wasteland while trying to escape from the decimated city. They must work together to find the best path. The game plays out over a set of linked scenarios that form a campaign, an ongoing story. Each previous scenario in the Campaign will affect the start of the next.



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THE MAIN PURPOSE OF A MOVIE POSTER HAS ALWAYS BEEN TO SEDUCE PEOPLE INTO SEEING THE FILM. BUT OCCASIONALLY PRODUCERS HAVE ABUSED THIS ART FORM TO MAKE PROMISES THAT THEIR MOVIE CANNOT DELIVER ON. WE HAD TO ASK: WHICH MOVIE POSTER IS THE MOST MISLEADING? TWO WRITERS ENTER THE RING TO BATTLE IT OUT!

WHAT HORROR MOVIE HAS THE MOST MISLEADING POSTER?

SEAN PLUMMER

Screamers (1981)

"Be warned: You will actually see a man turned inside-out" promised the one-sheet, emblazoned with the still-disturbing illustration of a screaming creature wearing its own veiny musculature and glistening brain on the outside of its body."

JOEL HARLEY

Camp Hell (2010)

"Eisenberg's Camp Hell screentime only amounts to a few minutes, but you wouldn't know it by the poster or DVD cover."

FALSE ADVERTISING" LIKELY WASN'T A PHRASE I WAS FAMILIAR WITH WHEN I WAS ELEVEN YEARS OLD. But that's precisely what the amazing (if ultimately bullshit) poster for 1981's *Screamers* was.

"Be warned: You will actually see a man turned inside-out" promised the one-sheet, emblazoned with the still-disturbing illustration of a screaming creature wearing its own veiny musculature and glistening brain on the outside of its body. "Welcome to your new home... Welcome to hell!"

But it turns out there was no such scenario in *Screamers*, although I did not discover this until finally seeing it a few years ago. Instead, the movie, which began life in 1979 as Italian director Sergio Martino's *The Island of the Fishmen*, features googly-eyed creatures that spend their screen time either clawing their victims to death or pawing at comely star Barbara Bach (*The Spy Who Loved Me*). No inside-out men, women, or otherwise to be found.

The story behind this unforgivable childhood deception is that Roger Corman's New World Pictures acquired it for the American market but decided that Martino's fantasy/adventure film was *dépassé* in a world where raunchy slashers like *Friday the 13th* were the hot new trend. So they cut out twenty minutes, filmed a new twelve-minute prologue with gore effects by Chris Walas (the man behind Cronenberg's *The Fly*), and put it out as *Something Waits in the Dark* in 1980. Continuing Corman's penchant for misdirection, the trailer featured nudity-heavy footage from New World's own fishman film, 1980's *Humanoids From the Deep*. It bombed.

But Corman wasn't done pushing for a return on his investment. He had future *Chopping Mall* director and then New World publicity man Jim Wynorski film a new trailer that pushed the inside-out man angle to front and centre and come up with a poster campaign and title that only lives on in infamy because of how shamelessly dishonest it is. I don't know how well *Screamers* did at the box office but it's the prime cinematic deception I'm still talking – if not screaming – about. So don't believe the trailer: rewatch *Hellraiser* if you prefer your meat skinless. ☠

FRESH FROM THE BREAKOUT SUCCESS OF *ZOMBIELAND*, JESSE EISENBERG WAS ON THE UP-AND-UP. It's not surprising, then, that he should be the focus of 2010's *Camp Hell* when it came to the movie's promotional materials. Lionsgate Entertainment was so confident in its star's draw that two different posters and DVD covers featured Eisenberg's gigantic head prominently; looming over the titular camp in one version and at the intersection of a giant crucifix in another. His name, too, was given top billing, plastered in bold typeface just above his face – either pensive, worried, or curiously content-looking, depending on which variation one happened across.

But Eisenberg wasn't the star of *Camp Hell* at all. The story of a demonic entity invading a Catholic summer camp, George VanBuskirk's supernatural thriller is a slow-burn rumination on Catholic guilt and teenage torment, starring Dana Delany, and Bruce Davison. Filmed in 2007 but released in 2010 – post-*Zombieland* and *The Social Network*, Eisenberg reportedly appeared in the film as a favour to friends, earning \$3000 for a single day of filming.

Eisenberg's *Camp Hell* screentime amounts to a few minutes, but you wouldn't know it by the poster or DVD cover. Billed as the lead and featured heavily in the official trailer ("Academy Award Nominee," no less), it's a particularly egregious bait-and-switch for a horror film from 2010. Beyond the dishonesty, it's not even a good shot of Eisenberg. The actor's serene half-smile hardly sells demonic horror film or serious religious thriller; after all that, *Camp Hell* appropriates his image without even putting it to good use!

Clearly, Eisenberg thought so too, launching a lawsuit against Lionsgate for the sum of \$3 million dollars, claiming that the marketing was fraudulent and misleading. Lionsgate's defence (that the use of Eisenberg's face fell under freedom of speech) didn't hold water, and he won the case's preliminary. Remember campers: thou shalt not bear false witness! ☠



LAST ISSUE'S WINNER
AS VOTED BY YOU ON TWITTER

WHICH MOVIE FEATURES THE BEST KILL SCENE OF AN ELDERLY PERSON?

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(PSYCHO II)

66%

34%

MISS OLIPHANT
(THE PIT)

PSYCHO II FEATURES THE BEST KILL SCENE
OF AN ELDERLY PERSON

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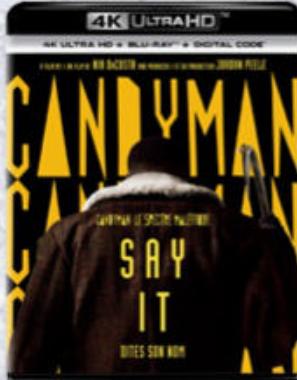
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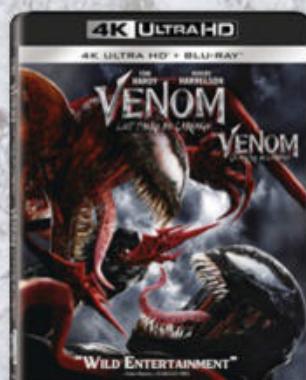
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